



This is a digital copy of a book that was preserved for generations on library shelves before it was carefully scanned by Google as part of a project to make the world's books discoverable online.

It has survived long enough for the copyright to expire and the book to enter the public domain. A public domain book is one that was never subject to copyright or whose legal copyright term has expired. Whether a book is in the public domain may vary country to country. Public domain books are our gateways to the past, representing a wealth of history, culture and knowledge that's often difficult to discover.

Marks, notations and other marginalia present in the original volume will appear in this file - a reminder of this book's long journey from the publisher to a library and finally to you.

Usage guidelines

Google is proud to partner with libraries to digitize public domain materials and make them widely accessible. Public domain books belong to the public and we are merely their custodians. Nevertheless, this work is expensive, so in order to keep providing this resource, we have taken steps to prevent abuse by commercial parties, including placing technical restrictions on automated querying.

We also ask that you:

- + *Make non-commercial use of the files* We designed Google Book Search for use by individuals, and we request that you use these files for personal, non-commercial purposes.
- + *Refrain from automated querying* Do not send automated queries of any sort to Google's system: If you are conducting research on machine translation, optical character recognition or other areas where access to a large amount of text is helpful, please contact us. We encourage the use of public domain materials for these purposes and may be able to help.
- + *Maintain attribution* The Google "watermark" you see on each file is essential for informing people about this project and helping them find additional materials through Google Book Search. Please do not remove it.
- + *Keep it legal* Whatever your use, remember that you are responsible for ensuring that what you are doing is legal. Do not assume that just because we believe a book is in the public domain for users in the United States, that the work is also in the public domain for users in other countries. Whether a book is still in copyright varies from country to country, and we can't offer guidance on whether any specific use of any specific book is allowed. Please do not assume that a book's appearance in Google Book Search means it can be used in any manner anywhere in the world. Copyright infringement liability can be quite severe.

About Google Book Search

Google's mission is to organize the world's information and to make it universally accessible and useful. Google Book Search helps readers discover the world's books while helping authors and publishers reach new audiences. You can search through the full text of this book on the web at <http://books.google.com/>

HN 1K76 V



A painting of a woman with a large black hat and a red garment, with the title 'THE ADVENTURESS' at the bottom.

THE ADVENTURESS

G. H. SHERWIN. KELNE, N. H.

Gift of The People of the United States
Through the Victory Book Campaign
(A. L. A. — A. R. C. — U. S. C.)
To the Army

THIS BOOK
is the Property of the Monadnock
Club and *must not* be taken from
the club rooms.

BY-LAWS

Section 3.—No member shall take from the rooms any book,
pamphlet or other property, nor mutilate or destroy the same.

G. A. DOWEN, KILNE, N. H.

**Gift of The People of the United States
Through the Victory Book Campaign
(A. L. A. — A. R. C. — U. S. O.)
To the Armed Forces and Merchant Marine**

THE ADVENTURESS



THE ADVENTRESS

THE ADVENTURESS

BY

Coralie Stanton

FRONTISPIECE BY

HARRISON FISHER



NEW YORK

T. J. McBRIDE & SON

MDCCCCVII

KD 17168



Copyright, 1907
T. J. McBRIDE & SON

Published March

CONTENTS

	PAGE
I. THE TEMPTATION OF THE MARQUESS,	5
II. THE TRAGEDY OF THE PRIMA DONNA,	26
III. THE ALIBI OF THE MINISTER,	50
IV. "WHEN GREEK MEETS GREEK,"	72
V. THE INCIDENT OF THE ROYAL PERSONAGE,	95
VI. THE FACTS ABOUT THE VAUXMAUR PEERAGE, . .	117
VII. THE INCIDENT OF THE GREAT DETECTIVE, . . .	137
VIII. HOW MIRIAM LEMAIRE CAME BACK FROM EXILE,	181
IX. THE AMERICAN COMBINE,	208
X. ONE OF HER VICTIMS,	232
XI. THE STORY OF THE SECOND HUSBAND,	248
XII. THE MYSTERY OF THE ROUND TABLE,	265

THE ADVENTURESS

I

THE TEMPTATION OF THE MARQUESS

At the time of which I write I had never seen Miriam Lemaire. I knew her face well from photographs, and I had seen the portrait Lenbach painted of her in Munich, and the Sargent portrait—"The Lady with the Red Hair."

Of course I had heard the many wild tales told about her strange personality, many of them doubtless gross exaggerations. They said, or rather whispered, that the Home Secretary was her plaything, and a certain royal personage her puppet. There was a story that she had actually saved a crowned head from ruin. There was also an unpleasant rumor that a certain Italian count had shot himself for love of her.

I expected much when I was told that I should meet Miriam Lemaire at Mrs. Ephraim Heinemann's ball in Carlton House Terrace on

that particular Thursday evening. But I was not prepared for what happened.

Miriam Lemaire is not a woman to be described. Where painters, poets and sculptors have dismally failed, I may be pardoned for not trying to paint her picture in words. She was a *rousse*, slightly above the medium height, graceful and sinuous in action. Take Lenbach's portrait and endow it with life and you will get the effect of those dark eyes of slumbering fires, of primal passion, the milky skin, the red of the lips.

Apart from all this, there was a subtle atmosphere surrounding her like an intangible and invisible mantle—a charm, a spell, a witchery. One cannot describe it. In repose, she reminded you of an Egyptian priestess, a Roman vestal; when she smiled you thought of Otero, of Franz Stück's "Die Sünde," and, when she spoke to you, you saw Bernhardt in the first act of *La Tosca*. She was an elusive contradiction. Of course, you knew that she was a very wicked woman, that is, unless you happened to be one of those who fell under her spell, when you probably shot yourself before you had strength to face the truth.

This woman, who spoke half a dozen languages with perfect ease, who painted, sculptured, wrote; who could hold her own with scientists and politicians; who knew the last word in everything; and who, had she lived in the fifteenth century, would have ruled kingdoms and altered the destinies of nations, was nothing more or less than a moneylender—a society vampire.

She married a very rich man when she was eighteen—it was at Buda-Pesth, so they said. It is an unpleasant story, and I repeat it with all reserve. She was singing in a café, and Lemaire, the banker, went mad over her and married her within a week. Within another week he had committed suicide, and had left his beautiful wife his sole heiress.

From that day Miriam Lemaire loomed out of the dim obscurity of her past upon the horizon of the salons of Europe; and became a power for good and evil, playing with men and women, and even nations, as a cat plays with mice. She it was who robbed Olga Kaulbach of her divine voice, who made the world the poorer by the ruin and death of a von Held, who sent young Gorleston to the scaffold, and

blasted the career of a brilliant politician like Peter Culmshawe. She was no ordinary woman, no common criminal. There was always something great, something magnificent, about her wickedness.

But to the ball in Carlton House Terrace and our meeting. Entering the florid Baroque salon of Mrs. Heinemann, I saw Miriam Lemaire flash past me in the second waltz. It was a cheap thing of Strauss's, but since that hour its air has always been associated with her. She danced superbly, and her partner did not show to any disadvantage either. He was the young Marquess of Devilford, and I thought, as they passed me, that he looked white and haggard. I was surprised. He was young, rich, and engaged to be married to one of the prettiest and most lovable girls in London, for Mary Denistone certainly justified the adjectives.

My introduction to Miriam Lemaire came later on, and I asked if she could strike out somebody's name in her programme and insert mine. She looked up into my eyes, and I felt hot and cold all over.

"That's very prettily put, Mr. North," she said. "I have never been asked for a dance in

just that way before. Suppose I give you number thirteen. It's a waltz."

Now I am not a sentimental man. I have unfortunately fallen in love at first sight too many times to be taken off my guard. Notwithstanding, I confess that, although my programme was soon full, I lived for number thirteen, wherein I admit I was foolish.

But a great many things were to happen before that dance. In the course of that fateful evening, without knowing it, I was to be swept into something in the nature of an intrigue, something that might very well have ended in a tragedy had it not been for—but let us not put the dessert before the soup and the fish.

It began with number four on the programme, which I danced with Devilford's *fiancée*, Mary Dennistone. She was a pretty little English rosebud, with a heart as good as gold; and was head over heels in love with young Devilford; as much in love with him as he was with her. Consequently, from the point of view of a marriageable man, she had ceased to be particularly interesting. On this occasion, however, she certainly proved an exception to the rule.

She was evidently much disturbed. I had never seen her in such a mood, and she puzzled me by her quite pointless chatter.

"Mr. North," she said suddenly, as we cut the latter half of the waltz and sat down under the palms, "I—I am greatly troubled about something. I hope you won't mind my asking you a question." She stopped and looked at me nervously. "It's about Dick," she added. Dick being Lord Devilford.

"We are old chums," I said.

"Well," she said hesitantly, "I—I am afraid something terrible is happening to him. He is acting so very peculiarly—and oh, Mr. North, I am very foolish. I am frightened!" She choked down a sob and I saw that her eyes were full of tears.

"My dear Miss Dennistone," I exclaimed, "what is the matter? Am I to understand——"

She bent lower, as if she were afraid of being overheard.

"Do you know how much he lost on the Lincoln?" she asked.

"'Pon my soul, I haven't the remotest idea," I answered. "But I do know that he can afford to drop a good deal, lucky man! You are not

suggesting that Devilford is in—er—financial difficulties?”

She nodded; and just then I remembered in a flash my impression early in the evening, when I had seen Devilford dancing with Miriam Lemaire. Miss Dennistone was watching me furtively. She was a sharp little thing. I perceived she was trying to read my thoughts, and determined she should not.

“Have you seen him this evening?” she asked.

“Not to speak to,” I evaded.

“But you know what he is doing?”

I shook my head.

“He has already danced four times with that woman!” she said.

“What woman?” I asked ingenuously.

“Miriam Lemaire, of course,” said she.

“Indeed!” said I, with affected surprise.

“Yes,” she cried, with a touch of anger; “and I know well enough what is going on. Dick needs money and she is going to lend him money——”

“My dear Miss Dennistone!” I exclaimed, though I fully realized the possibility of what she said.

Mary Dennistone set her teeth. "That's it," she said, in a quivering little voice that went straight to my heart and made me suddenly resolve to be loyal to her.

"But why do you tell me this?" I asked.

"Oh, I don't know. I must have been mad," she cried, in a choked voice. "Come, let us go. Somehow, Mr. North, I always look upon you as a friend—a real friend, you understand; and I thought, I hoped—it was silly of me, of course—that you might be able to help me to—to save him!" She blurted out the last words. "A woman can do so little, and a man can do so much."

That was all that passed between us. Before either of us could say more the band had struck up the next dance, and young Westcough, of the War Office, came up and claimed my partner.

I wandered away through the crowd feeling peculiarly uneasy, and should in all probability have gone to get a peg in the buffet had not someone touched me lightly on the arm and said, in a deep-toned voice, clear as a bell, and in English that had a most pronounced German accent:

“So you have forgotten all about our dance, and you were going to drink some of that terrible whiskey—eh?”

I started, turned, and made a lame apology, remembering that I was engaged to Fräulein Olga Kaulbach.

It was a *Faust* night, that evening, at the opera, and so Olga was free. London had been raving over her *Isolde* and *Elisabeth* that season; and she had been engaged by Mrs. Heinemann, at a stupendous cost, to sing a song before supper.

I had known the Wagnerian singer several years, in fact, ever since she startled Berlin with her *Brunnhilde*, and we were quite old friends. She was an extremely interesting woman, and strikingly handsome.

“Let us—how do you say it?—sit out this dance, Mr. North,” she said. “I am so tired. Take me to a quiet corner and talk to me about the student days. Have you forgotten Heidelberg—*ja*? And Munich? *Nicht*?”

I acquiesced willingly. We went into the palm house and sat in a secluded alcove. I smoked a cigarette, and she chattered away in Bavarian German about everything under the

sun. Somehow I did not listen much. I was thinking of young Devilford and Mary Dennistone—and Miriam Lemaire.

And then it was that a curious thing happened. Suddenly, and without the slightest apparent cause, Olga broke off in a sentence and caught my arm.

“Look!” she whispered. “Hush! It will be interesting.”

I did look, and caught my breath. But two or three yards from where we sat in the shadow were Devilford and Miriam Lemaire. They had entered quietly. The light of a shaded lamp was thrown upon them both. Devilford’s attitude expressed the deepest dejection. The woman was speaking in a low, penetrating voice, and was evidently trying to persuade him to do something to which he objected.

“Listen,” whispered Olga again. “Don’t let them hear or see us.”

“That’s rather—er—inadmissible, is n’t it?” I said.

“Not in this case,” she retorted. “It is justifiable. It may involve a great deal.”

“You mean?”

“A woman’s happiness; a man’s honor.”

I moved uneasily. What did Olga know? Her words were almost startling.

"I tell you what it is, Devilford," said Miriam Lemaire, in that velvet-toned voice of hers. "You are very foolish. You will forget all about her in time—I give you a month at the farthest."

"Never," groaned the man. "She is everything to me."

"Anyhow, by your own confession, she is lost to you."

"I was going to blow out my brains to-night," said the man dully.

"Which would be extremely foolish," retorted the woman. "Moreover, it would make a dreadful mess." She laughed a little rippling laugh.

The man looked at her scowling. It was the act of a trapped animal. He seemed to be looking for some loophole of escape.

"You—you fiend!" he jerked out.

"My offer still holds good," she said calmly.

"It means selling my soul."

"You are too painfully dramatic," she objected, with a shrug of her pretty shoulders. "Come, my dear Devilford, what is your answer? Yes—or no? Marry me; give up the

little pink and white doll you are infatuated with—and here's the further loan."

She held out a cheque. The man took it mechanically, and read the amount aloud:

"Twenty-one thousand pounds!"

"Good Heaven!" I gasped. But Olga's hand tightened on my arm. I held my breath.

Devilford's face was a study for a painter. It was the face of a man racked in an agony of temptation—a man tempted beyond his strength. "It would save me," he mumbled almost inarticulately. "It would clear up everything. You've already lent me fifteen thousand. And this—but without it——"

"You need not consider that," said Miriam Lemaire. "Is it a bargain? Come, Dick, what is it?" A tender cadence came into the musical voice. "A loan at five per cent. as the other. I have your paper."

"Yes; but this has another condition. I am selling my life. And yet I must—I must do it. But tell me one thing. If—if I should be able to repay this within three days—am I free?"

"Of course," said Miriam Lemaire. "But you will not repay it. We must be married on the third day."

"Heaven help me," groaned Devilford. "There is no choice. This will save me. I—I take it."

I rose hurriedly, heedless of Olga's restraining hand. "Come," I whispered, "let us go. This is horrible!"

"It is beautiful," she said, and laughed quietly to herself.

"What do you mean?" I said, aghast.

"You shall see," said she. "Mary Dennistone is a dear friend of mine—Mrs. Lemaire is not. I have a plan. Yes, you shall see. But you can, if you will, help me. Can I trust you?"

"You ought to know me better than to ask," I said.

"Well, then, are you fond enough of me, and of Mary Dennistone, and Lord Devilford to—to save him?"

"To raise twenty thousand pounds is impossible as far as I am concerned," I answered.

She looked at me keenly.

"You are engaged for number thirteen to Mrs. Lemaire," she said.

"How do you know?"

"Quite by accident. I was standing quite close to you when she gave you the dance."

"Really I—I did not see you."

"That comes of being insignificant. But let us come to the point. Will you do me a favor, and promise me not to claim that dance—to, in fact, to keep out of the way?"

My face fell. "I don't quite see how I can do that without being absolutely rude."

"You can do it easily. Go and get some whiskey."

"But, my dear Fräulein! English gentlemen don't do that sort of thing! I am particularly looking forward to that dance. I am interested in Mrs. Lemaire; still, since you ask it——"

"I do ask it, I make a special point of it," said Fräulein Olga.

"It's a bargain," I answered. "But am I to know nothing? Why this mystery?"

"You will know everything in due course. In the mean time, trust me." She pressed my hand and left me.

Of what followed for the half hour between that dance and number thirteen I have no knowledge. I saw Miriam Lemaire several times, and watched her with a curious fascination. When number thirteen came, according to my promise, I retired to the billiard room and

occupied myself with a cigar, feeling the while somewhat like a cad.

What was Olga doing, and what could my present undignified part in the mystery have to do with it? I was musing meditatively, when Devilford entered the room. He looked like a ghost and staggered drunkenly. He drank an inordinate amount of brandy before he noticed me. Then he seized my hand and laughed harshly. I confess at the moment I feared he was either drunk or had actually lost his reason.

"Old man," he said, "I've news for you—oh, fine and glorious news! I've broken it off with Mary."

"Well," I said grimly, "you don't appear so very happy about it."

"That is n't all," he continued fiercely. "Perhaps you'll be glad to know that I'm engaged to marry Mrs. Lemaire."

"Do you expect me to congratulate you?" I asked.

"No," he rapped out with an oath. "I don't, but I want you to be my best man at the wedding on Monday."

"With pleasure," said I.

And then he left me.

Later in the evening, I saw Mary Dennistone again, and knew her heart was broken. She left early. So did I, and without seeing Olga.

I looked in vain for her, and I may confess I looked also in vain for Miriam Lemaire, but they had both disappeared.

I was puzzled. What had happened? What was Olga doing?

I wondered a good deal that night, and wondered all through the next day, and it was not until Saturday that I began to see light. On Saturday morning a messenger called at my rooms with a letter from Olga. It ran as follows:

"I am asking you to do me a great favor. I have had to borrow £20,000, which I am quite certain of being able to repay within a month. In fact, I have the money, but it is not immediately available. I enclose a promissory note, which I shall be glad if you will sign."

The promissory note was given for the joint acceptance of Olga Kaulbach of Covent Garden Theatre and the Hof Theater, at Munich, and myself, to Mrs. Miriam Lemaire for £20,000

and interest at five per cent., and it was payable in one month from its date.

I think Fräulein Kaulbach's letter must have given me an attack of dementia. One of the things I don't do is to sign notes of hand for anybody. But on the mad impulse of the moment the rule was broken. I signed the note and returned it.

That evening I received a wire from Devilford—"With you in an hour." Before that time had elapsed, however, he was in my rooms and overwhelming me with his news.

"Look here! old man," he shouted. "I have just received these from Mary." He laid a bulky bundle of banknotes on the table. "There are £21,000." And then he told me, half inarticulately, the story of his compact with Miriam Lemaire.

"And Mary came to know of it, somehow, and—and, by heaven, North, she's saved me! And yet—put yourself in my place—can I take it from her? I dare not; and yet——"

"Of course you'll take it," said I grimly.

"Then you must come around with me at once to Mrs. Lemaire's. I must settle the thing now, this very hour!"

We went in a hansom. Mrs. Lemaire received us in the pink and white boudoir of her little house in Park Street.

"I hear you are to be Dick's best man on Monday," she said to me. "Were it not for that I should be slow to forgive your desertion of me at the Heinemanns'."

"I was to be his best man," I said. "But——"

And then Devilford produced the money.

Her face became just a shade paler, and she looked at me quickly. There was a sudden flare of red fire in her beautiful eyes.

"Have I you to thank for this?" she said sharply.

I affected complete ignorance of her meaning, and the interview was not prolonged.

As we were leaving, Devilford with his notes, I. O. U.'s, and freedom, she drew me aside.

"Mr. North," she said, "if I thought that you—you had thwarted me, I should be sorry for you."

"Well?" I asked, a little defiantly. "If I say it was not I?"

"Then," said she, and her voice quivered with strong feeling—"by the God you believe in and I do not, I will never rest until I find out

who it was; after which there will be a settling of scores."

Devilford set off post haste to the Dennistones' house. He was half mad with joy, and I considered that he came out of his muddle with less feeling than a gentleman should show. But, if Mary was happy, what mattered it?

The thing done, I went around to the Carlton to find Olga.

"How did you do it?" I asked. "I think I have earned the right to know everything."

"Why," she said, "I borrowed £21,000 and gave it to Mary for him, as you know. I arranged it with the Lemaire woman during your promised dance, number thirteen. It was n't necessary for me to go to her. I could have raised the money elsewhere, if I had wanted to. But it was poetic justice—to make her lend the money which was to defeat her miserable plot. I said I was in temporary difficulties; and she never suspected. You see, she hates Mary Dennistone and she has set her mind on being an English peeress. She built the entire plot—saw to it that Devilford got into difficulties; closed all doors for his escape; was quite sure of her ground; knew he could never raise the

money—then drew the net around him. She reckoned without Mary and without me, my good friend. I shall repay her within the month, and, if she does n't find out before, I shall then have the extreme pleasure of telling her."

"If I were you, my dear Fräulein," I said gravely, "I should be very careful not to tell her—careful by all means not to let her find it out. The enmity of Miriam Lemaire is not desirable."

Olga Kaulbach smiled, and a better student of women than I have ever been might have said that Miriam Lemaire would one day meet her match in this German opera singer.

The next day I met Mary Dennistone.

"I can never thank you enough, Mr. North, for what you have done," she said, pouring out gratitude which I did not deserve. "You have given me everything I possess—and Dick. And we will repay every penny of it—yes, indeed we shall."

I did not tell her how little she had to thank me for. Olga Kaulbach puzzled me. Somehow, I felt that we had not seen the end of it.

That evening I met Miriam Lemaire again. It was at a reception at the Woolridges'.

"Mr. North," she said, "I would give a great deal to know who lent Devilford that money."

"What would you do if you knew?" I asked.

A look that was almost demoniacal came and sat in the beautiful eyes.

"What would I do?" she repeated. "I—I would make death seem a blessed relief to that man or woman. That is all."

I felt suddenly very cold. I thought of Olga, and wondered if by any means this terrible woman had put two and two together to make the Fräulein's borrowing and Devilford's paying but two stages in the same journey. Then, on the spur of the moment, and with the idea of shielding Olga, I said:

"I'm afraid, my dear Mrs. Lemaire, that you won't find it very interesting: smashing me—you know."

"You?" She started, then smiled. I had never seen such a smile.

I believe I can say, without boasting, that I am not more cowardly than other men, but that night I felt vaguely disquieted. I had Miriam Lemaire for an enemy.

II

THE TRAGEDY OF THE PRIMA DONNA

To know that a very beautiful, a very clever, and withal, a very wicked woman, is your deadly enemy is not reassuring. Circumstances over which I had little control had made Miriam Lemaire my debtor in the field of reprisal. Nevertheless, save for an unpleasant feeling that she was biding her time to square accounts with me, and the subtle suggestion of antagonism in her lovely eyes, the embarrassing state of affairs did not make a palpable breach in our social relations.

I had met her several times since Mrs. Heine-mann's ball; but it was not until one night at the opera, during the performance of *Der Fliegende Holländer*, that I found myself *en tête-à-tête* with her.

Olga Kaulbach, the wonderful young Bavarian singer, was taking the part of *Senta* for the first time, and London was enthusiastic.

"Fräulein Kaulbach is a great friend of yours, Mr. North?" said Mrs. Lemaire, with what seemed a too careful assumption of disinterest.

"Yes," I answered; "a very good friend. I knew her in Berlin, when she first startled the musical world."

"She has a beautiful voice," said Mrs. Lemaire.

"The most wonderful voice I have ever heard," I agreed warmly.

Mrs. Lemaire nodded.

"You are quite right," she said; "she sings like an angel. It is almost supernatural; it is superb. I suppose you always go to hear her when you can?"

"Always."

"Then perhaps you would care to come to my house next week—on Wednesday. I am giving a little dinner—quite a small affair—and we propose going to the opera later on. Your friend, Fräulein Kaulbach, is singing *Brunnhilde* in *Siegfried*, that night, as you doubtless know."

"Nothing would give me greater pleasure," I assured her, though at the same moment I felt vaguely conscious of something strange in her manner, in the velvet tone.

Certainly her manner had changed—for the better. She was most friendly. And the change had been sudden. We had met two or three days before and she had barely deigned to acknowledge me.

“Very well,” she said. “I will send you a note to-morrow to remind you. Dinner will be early, at seven, because of the opera. By the way, Fräulein Kaulbach will be one of us. She will not care to be at Covent Garden till about nine, so it is convenient for her.”

Two days afterwards I met Olga Kaulbach in Sloane Street. She was walking with a tall and rather impressive-looking man, dark and handsome, and obviously a foreigner. I had seen him somewhere before, but could not remember where.

She stopped and introduced us.

“Mr. North—Humbert,” she said. “This, my dear Mr. North, is the gentleman to whom I am engaged—Count Vendramin.”

So Olga was to be married at last, I thought, and regarded with due respect the lucky man who had won her.

The Count was a quiet man—a man of reserve force. I liked him, and, now that I

heard his name, I remembered that he was a Roman and by repute wealthy.

"I hear," I said to Olga, "that I am to have the pleasure of meeting you at Mrs. Lemaire's."

"You hear the truth, for a wonder," she said, with a merry twinkle in her Saxon blue eyes. "You see, we are friends. The dinner is to seal the compact. The little Devilford affair ended satisfactorily, notwithstanding all your gloomy prognostications. I repaid my loan, and when I did so I told her that I had borrowed of her to pay her, and she—well, she took it in a sporting spirit." This in an aside which Vendramin's sudden and good-natured interest in a passing carriage permitted.

I smiled, but her words gave me a twinge of uneasiness at the time. I had heard enough, and seen enough, of Miriam Lemaire to be sure that she was not the woman to take a defeat so patiently. It was my opinion that Olga Kaulbach would hear more of it. However, other things intervening, I gave the matter no further thought until Wednesday, when I presented myself at Mrs. Lemaire's dainty house in Park Street.

When I stopped to think of it, it struck me as curious and something incongruous that men

and women of good social standing, birth, and education were glad to have Mrs. Lemaire at their houses, and were honored at being included in her own select little parties, when they, and all the world, knew that she was merely a moneylender—a moneylender, too, without much originality, lending cash at fair rates of interest, and, by virtue of that trade, holding the honor of men and women in her keeping. But that did not make her any the less fascinating, and I was not surprised at finding a select gathering at her house, counting among others a prominent, popular, and not altogether incapable Cabinet Minister, and the brilliant German specialist, Professor von Held, a man whose fame was unequaled as a physician and an experimental scientist.

One curious thing impressed me in the interval before dinner. Von Held did not seem altogether at his ease, and more than once I saw him holding whispered conversations with Mrs. Lemaire, as opportunity offered. Later on the Fräulein Olga arrived, and in the few minutes' conversation we had she said:

“You see the tall big-boned man with the eye-glasses and the cold sneer?”

“Von Held?”

She nodded.

“The great doctor, is it not? Well, he’s in her power. Yes, I am sure of it. Observe him.”

“I will,” I said.

“And the other man, too—the handsome man with the red rose in his coat.”

“That’s Culmshawe, the Secretary of State for India.”

“Oh, is it? Well, he is in the toils, too. Don’t ask me how I know. There are things one explains not. *Nicht wahr?* I tell you this is going to be interesting.”

That Miriam Lemaire’s power extended to his Majesty’s ministers and to world-known scientists startled me a little, and I felt sorry for Culmshawe.

Dinner that night was unmarked by any incident of importance until we reached the period of dessert and small talk. Miriam Lemaire proved herself to be a hostess of perfect tact, and a woman who could hold her own with Culmshawe on politics and von Held on the latest bacteriological theory.

In the seating I had been honored with the

place at her right, and under cover of one of Culmshawe's ponderous speeches she whispered:

"I am glad you have come to-night because it gives me an opportunity of telling you that I am sorry I ever believed you meant to thwart me. I have been doing you an injustice. You really made me believe for the moment that you had outwitted me in the Devilford affair."

I tried to adopt a look properly puzzled, though her meaning was clear enough.

"I won't insult you, Mr. North," she went on, "by pretending that you don't know why I lent Lord Devilford twenty thousand pounds. At the time I wanted to be, and meant to be, the Marchioness of Devilford. I am honest with you, am I not?"

"You honor me," I said blandly.

"Someone else saved Lord Devilford the fate of being my husband—someone we both know." She stopped and gave me a swift glance. "You know to whom I refer?"

"Do I?" I asked weakly.

"Someone—a mutual friend of ours—borrowed money from me to repay Devilford's debt. It was provoking. I was annoyed."

"It is," I humbly suggested, "the price of being so very rich."

She smiled curiously.

"So, you see, we understand each other, Mr. North. I was beginning to dislike you. Now we can be friends."

"Which means that your displeasure has fallen upon someone else—upon the mutual friend?"

She looked at me again. I met her gaze and started involuntarily. The fearsome look was in her eyes again.

"I do not forget," she murmured, "and I never forgive. I always admit a mistake, though. That is what I have just been doing—to you."

"Do you mean that you would stoop to a personal revenge?" I asked mildly.

"You shall say whether the penalty fits the crime," she answered gaily, and then she rose hurriedly and became in a moment the solicitous hostess. For Olga Kaulbach, for some unexplainable reason, had suddenly fainted, falling into the arms of Professor von Held.

"It is the heat," exclaimed von Held. "My poor dear young lady!"

Miriam Lemaire hastened to the fainting girl. Vendramin was by her side. Culmshawe was opening a window. Someone else was pouring out brandy.

"I think if we removed her to another room," said von Held very gently, "she would recover."

"Do, by all means," exclaimed Mrs. Lemaire, and her voice thrilled as with genuine alarm. "This is most unfortunate. Pray let us take the dear girl to my room. Come, Count, you and the Professor carry her. And you, Mr. North, and the others stay here. She will be all right in a minute."

Between them, von Held and Vendramin carried Olga Kaulbach from the room, and those of us who remained tried to talk as if nothing had happened. A minute later Vendramin returned.

"She's in Mrs. Lemaire's bedroom," he said. "She is recovering. They turned me out. The doctor is attending to her. I hope it is nothing serious. *Sancta Maria!* She has the terrible strain before her to-night at the opera."

He had hardly finished speaking when Miriam Lemaire returned. She was flushed with excitement.

"It's all right," she said. "She will be back in a moment. Merely a little dizziness. Dear me! how very hot it is!"

Five minutes afterwards—or perhaps it was ten minutes—it matters not—Olga returned. She was laughing a little hysterically as she apologized.

"I am all right now," she said. "Only just then I—I—things faded so queerly. I hope I did not shock you all. Doctor von Held has given me a little brandy, and I am quite recovered."

I have given the incident more prominence than it had. It was a mere passing episode, and before we rose from the table it was forgotten.

Olga Kaulbach, accompanied by Vendramin, went on to the opera, about nine o'clock. She was not due until the great third act.

"*Au revoir*, dear Fräulein," said Mrs. Le-maire. "I am eager to hear you in that grand duet. Look out for us afterwards. Our box will be crammed."

"I shall sing my best," said Olga triumphantly. "I shall exceed myself. I feel sure of it. Thank you so much for such a pleasant evening."

A few minutes afterwards we all drove to Covent Garden—Mrs. Lemaire wearing a wonderful dress of glittering sequin sheen and magnificent diamonds that shone with a thousand lights—Culmshawe, Mr. and Mrs. Merton, and myself. We were to meet Count Vendramin at the opera. Only von Held did not accompany us. He bade us “good-bye” on the doorstep, saying that he had an important case which would rob him of the pleasure he would otherwise have had in hearing Fräulein Kaulbach in her great *rôle*.

Covent Garden Opera House was a sight worth going far to see that night. We arrived just before the curtain went up on the third act of the great masterpiece, and the vast house was filled from floor to ceiling—one glittering, glowing mass of light and color and flashing diamonds.

Miriam Lemaire’s box was on the grand tier on the right of the stage, and about the sixth or seventh from the proscenium. As she took her seat the stir in the audience was a tribute to her charms, and, truly, she was the most superbly beautiful and the most wonderfully attired woman in that great galaxy of splendor and beauty.

Only Culmshawe kept a little in the background, and, since he was a man who generally did the very reverse whenever he had the opportunity, I remembered what Olga had said. Was he in Miriam Lemaire's power?

We had hardly taken our seats—I sat next to Mrs. Lemaire by her particular command—when the overture of the third act began. Then the curtain went up and the lights went down, and a great hush fell upon the crowded house.

Olga Kaulbach's appearance was late in the act; however, I knew that everyone was waiting for her to come on. They had come to hear the great Kaulbach sing *Brunnhilde*. She had a world-wide reputation; but this was her first season in London, and Covent Garden had never heard her in *Siegfried*.

At length the time we were all waiting for came. The rocky scene changed, and, amidst fiery vapors and to the throbbing of the weird fire music, the great house saw the lovely form of Olga Kaulbach, clad in her coat of mail, as a Valkyrie, asleep, lying with her shield half covering her body.

At that moment I thought I had never seen her look so beautiful. The great audience gasped.

“Kaulbach! Kaulbach!” came from all sides in hushed whispers.

But Siegfried was singing. He was a great tenor; but somehow we were not listening to him. It was the sleeping form of the Kaulbach that held our breathless attention.

We saw Siegfried strip her of her armor, her helmet and breastplate; saw him sink in adoration by her side—he who had come through flames to rescue her. We looked on while he pressed a long and ardent kiss upon the lips that were dead in sleep. Brunnhilde opened her blue eyes and gazed up into his in wondering astonishment. Then slowly she rose into a sitting position.

Now was the time—now the glorious voice was to burst forth. This was what we had been waiting for.

At that moment Miriam Lemaire laid her hand on mine. It was as cold as ice.

“Listen,” she said, and her voice sounded hoarse.

For a moment my eyes left Olga and the stage and rested upon the woman by my side; then I started, and, hardly knowing what I did, rose to my feet.

There was a look in the face of Miriam Lemaire that I cannot describe—a look of the intensest hatred, of the most triumphant revenge. It was horrible.

Then I looked at Olga. Her lips parted.

“Heil dir, sonne!

Heil dir, licht!”

Those were the words that should have thrilled us; but she never sang them. Her voice broke on the first word.

It was not her voice—it was not a voice at all. I saw a look of unspeakable terror flash into her face, and she staggered to her feet.

Something very like panic flashed through the audience. People looked at each other in bewilderment. This was not the voice of Olga Kaulbach. It was more like the croak of a raven.

Once more she tried.

“Heil dir, sonne!”

It was almost inaudible; it ended in a hoarse choking cough; and Olga Kaulbach reeled forward; pointed wildly up at Miriam Lemaire, and fell forward. She had swooned.

A short exclamation burst from the lips of

Count Vendramin, and without a word to us he dashed from the box.

"Good God!" I groaned. "What does it mean?"

Miriam Lemaire looked up into my face, and her eyes were glowing with fierce triumph.

"She has lost her voice," she said, in harsh, metallic tones; "that is all. Olga Kaulbach can sing no more. Now you perhaps understand why—why I asked you here to-night, eh?"

I gripped her wrist.

"You fiend!" was all I could say. And then I looked wildly around me, stunned, hardly knowing whether I was awake or dreaming.

The curtain had come down. The orchestra was playing "God Save the King." Everyone had risen.

Then someone far away up in the amphitheater raised a cheer, and the house took it up in one great volume of sound.

They had been terribly disappointed, but they knew that an accident had happened—they knew that Olga Kaulbach could not help it.

"Kaulbach!" they shouted. "Kaulbach!"

A little man came before the curtain, and after

a minute, when silence had been obtained, he said, in a little voice:

"Ladies and gentlemen, I greatly regret to have to announce that a serious accident has happened to Fräulein Olga Kaulbach, and she will be unable to sing her part this evening. As the management has no worthy substitute to offer, I have to crave your leniency."

Again they shouted and cheered.

Miriam Lemaire turned to me.

"Give me my cloak, Mr. North," she commanded. And then: "Let us go. It is very noisy. You have seen what I do to a woman who tries to thwart me. Come—let us go to the Savoy and have some supper."

I did not wait to hear more, for I was forcing my way from the box with one idea in my mind. I must see Olga, and learn what it meant.

I met Vendramin outside her dressing-room, and his face was as white as paper.

"The doctor is there," he stammered. "She has n't recovered consciousness. *Dio mio*, North, what can it mean? It will kill her. Her voice—her heavenly voice! Do you think—is it possible that there could be any foul play?"

I bit my lip.

"Wait and let us hear what the doctor says."

The doctor was a long time in making his exit from the dressing-room; and, when he did, he drew me aside to say that Fräulein Kaulbach had recovered consciousness, but that she was very ill. "In fact," said he, "she is suffering from a very severe form of laryngeal diphtheria."

"Diphtheria!" I gasped. "Why, man, she was perfectly well this evening—a couple of hours ago. There was nothing the matter. She would never have come here to sing if——"

The doctor looked very grave and said:

"I admit that it is a most extraordinary case. I have sent for a specialist, and we will consult."

I scanned the doctor's face. He was a man with whom I had a slight acquaintance; by name Hankey.

"See here, Dr Hankey," I said; "you are keeping something from me. What is it?"

"I would rather not say just at present," he rejoined. "I admit I am puzzled."

"You—you don't think that her life is in danger?" asked Vendramin.

"I cannot say," replied Dr. Hankey. "It may be that antitoxin will save her. Between us, gentlemen, I may say that I have examined the throat and——"

"Go on!" Vendramin and I said it as one man.

"I find on the rear walls of the larynx indications which warrant the belief that the diphtheritic virus has been implanted recently, and mechanically."

"My God!" groaned Vendramin.

"What fiend's work this may be I cannot say," continued the doctor. "But I give you my opinion with all reserve, for it is a most terrible thing to say—a monstrous charge to bring. I nevertheless believe that someone has injected pure culture of diphtheria."

Vendramin's fists clenched. His face was livid with rage.

"Who?" he cried hoarsely. "Who? Let me find the man!"

"Pray calm yourself, my dear man," said the doctor. "I may be wrong; but, as far as my experience goes, I can find no other explanation."

I don't know what made me, but at that mo-

ment I thought of von Held. I gripped Vendramin's wrist.

"Come with me," I said huskily. "Come at once. We have work to do."

"Where are we going?" asked Vendramin.

"To see von Held," I answered.

He looked puzzled.

"What for?" he asked dully.

"Promise me," I said, "that whatever is the result of our interview with von Held, you will remain calm."

"What do you mean?" he asked with sudden interest.

"I mean that you will probably wish to kill Doctor von Held to-night. But you must not do so."

"*Santo Dio!* Can you mean to suggest that—that he—he——"

"Wait and see," was all I said; and we went out by the stage door, called a cab, and drove on in an awful silence.

I don't know what von Held's footman must have thought of me, for I brushed past him without a word.

"Is the Professor in his room?" I asked sternly, and repeated the question, for the man

was staring at me dumbly. At length he mumbled.

“Yes, sir—in here, sir.” And threw open a door on the right hand of the Harley Street hall.

Von Held was standing by his table, tearing up papers: when he looked up and saw me, and the white face of Vendramin behind me, he sank into a chair and stared at us like a man suddenly palsied. I was by his side in an instant. He was trembling in every limb. But his face, and that look he had given me, had told me what I wanted to know.

I gripped his wrist, and the piece of paper he held dropped to the carpet. In its falling I noticed a name—Miriam Lemaire. I picked it up, and in one glance saw and partially understood. It was a promissory note he had given to Miriam Lemaire for £4,000. He was tearing it up. It had been returned to him. Why? How had he redeemed it?

And on the table in front of him there were several others, for large amounts—cancelled promissory notes.

“You infernal scoundrel!” I raged, gripping him till the bones of his wrist cracked.

Von Held made a violent effort to control himself.

"You know, then?" he stammered. "You understand?"

I nodded.

"Tell me," I commanded. "What did you do? and how and why did you do it? Now—at once, or by heaven——"

Vendramin was standing between us, his eyes aflame with a murderous resolve. I pushed him away.

"Remember my warning," I cautioned, and he fell back into a chair and watched us as a tiger watches his prey. Von Held glanced from one to the other of us.

"I was driven to," he groaned. "I could not help it. I was her slave. I was ruined, and she—she offered me everything if I would do it. I owed her tens of thousands, and—and——"

"And she could make you do such a devilish thing as that?"

He bowed his head.

"She arranged everything," he said, monotonously; "everything. We drugged a grape. I sat next to her, you remember; she fainted,

and, once alone with her in Mrs. Lemaire's bedroom, it was the work of a second."

"What was it?" I asked huskily.

"Pure culture of diphtheria." His eyes lighted up. All the scientist was to the fore. "You saw the effect? It was as I had expected; I would have staked my life upon it—eh? She would never know it herself; not until—until—she sang. Then—paralysis, and afterwards—afterwards—It was a triumph of science! The most virulent natural form of the disease requires three days for its development—I produce it in one hour!"

"What did you get for this work?" I asked, with difficulty keeping my hands from his throat.

He laid his thin hands on the notes.

"These," he said. "All I owed her—everything. It meant freedom to me—new life."

"And what are you going to do?"

"Do?" He laughed discordantly. "I was going to make a fresh start; but now—now it is done—I—I think it will be different." As he spoke he opened a drawer in which I saw a revolver. "Yes, I think it will be a start in another direction. She has ruined me. It is too late, and— Oh, what I have done? What have I

done? And yet I swear it was not I. It was she! Miriam Lemaire, fiend that she is! Inch by inch she dragged me down; lower and lower have I sunk! She has me in her net still. I am still her slave."

I could hear no more. I turned on my heel.

"Come away," I said to Vendramin. "We can do no good by staying. Let us go. We have learned what we wanted to know. Come."

"And leave him?" cried Vendramin. "Not until I have killed him."

Von Held rose from his chair. The revolver was clutched in his skinny hand.

"I will save you that trouble, Count," he said. He laid the revolver down. "Later on—later on. You will hear of it."

When Vendramin and I got back to Covent Garden it was to learn that Olga Kaulbach had been removed to a private hospital, to await in isolation the further development of the grim disease.

In the next morning's paper three announcements followed each other in close proximity. One was an account of the excitement at the opera on the previous evening, and Fräulein Kaulbach's sudden illness. The other was

that the well-known Professor von Held had committed suicide. And the last was that Mrs. Lemaire had given a dinner party on the previous evening, at which the Secretary for India had been present. It was followed by a description of her toilet at the opera later on.

III

THE ALIBI OF THE MINISTER

I WAS in the court room at the time. It was crowded, hot, and stuffy. The Gorleston case had been a nine days' sensation and had now reached its culmination.

The Lord Chief Justice, who had been trying the case, had assumed the black cap. The chaplain stood by his side. The prisoner, white as chalk, nerved himself as for a blow, gripping the railing of the dock.

"Robert Pomeroy Gorleston," said his lordship, solemnly, "you have been found guilty by twelve of your fellow countrymen of the murder of your uncle, Sir Richard Pomeroy Gorleston. It is not incumbent upon me to comment here upon the verdict, nor is it my desire to do so. I can only express the hope that you will make your peace with your God before the law calls upon you to expiate your crime. My duty is to pronounce sentence.

Have you anything to say before this sentence is pronounced?"

The white-faced young man in the Old Bailey dock stared dully at the judge. His lips moved but no sound came. Then mechanically he turned and looked at someone in the court, and instinctively every eye followed his. At whom was he looking? To whom was he making that agonized dumb appeal? For everyone who saw the look on his face felt and knew that it was an appeal—a reproachful, final appeal to some one who could help him and yet had not done so.

That it was not an involuntary act on the condemned man's part I am quite certain, although the newspaper reporters afterwards said that it was the action of a smitten creature seeking for help where there was no help—the action of a drowning man clutching at a straw where there was no straw to clutch at. I deny it. In my opinion Gorleston deliberately turned and looked straight into the eyes of a woman, and that woman was Miriam Lemaire.

Mrs. Lemaire sat between Lady Melfort and Mrs. Punter-Gold. She had been at the trial every day, noting the proceedings step by step,

intently. It was a *cause célèbre*, and all society had been in the spectators' benches, for young Gorleston was known to everyone; he was young, clever, of good birth and breeding, and very popular. Yet young Gorleston had been found guilty of shooting his uncle, the old baronet—the man who had been a father to him—the man who, it was proved, had left him all his money and lands, as well as the title.

That look of the prisoner's sent the blood tingling through every nerve of my body. A sudden and fierce excitement surged up in me, and in a moment many things that had been obscure became plain. I felt that we were on the eve of a great sensation.

But I was mistaken. The pallid-cheeked, ghastly looking Gorleston turned again and faced the judge, and again his white lips moved. This time everyone heard the words.

"I have nothing to say, my lord, except what I have repeatedly said—I am innocent."

There was a moment of tense excitement—a moment of breathless silence—and the judge spoke.

"Nothing remains," he said gravely, and in a voice that shook with suppressed emotion, "but

for me to pronounce the formal sentence of death. The sentence of this court upon you is that you be taken from this place to his Majesty's prison at Holloway, and from thence in due course to the place of execution, where you be hanged by the neck until you be dead! And may God Almighty have mercy on your soul."

Then Gorleston turned, and, like a man walking in his sleep, staggered from the dock and disappeared from public view—for the last time.

The case was ended—ended so far as the public was concerned, so far as I was concerned, I thought; and yet, had I but known it, it was only in its beginning.

Hitherto I have, as far as possible, written only of what actually came under my own observation. I do not propose to depart from that rule now.

As I was leaving the court Mrs. Lemaire spoke to me.

"A most interesting case, Mr. North," she commented; "and so mysterious. Even now I really cannot bring myself to believe that poor Bobby Gorleston could have done this terrible thing."

"I quite agree with you," I said, perhaps a little coldly. "It seems to me that there is a good deal that has not come out at the trial."

She met my gaze and answered, quietly enough:

"I think so, too."

"Gorleston was a great friend of yours, was he not?" I asked.

"A very great friend," she answered, and quickly changed the subject by asking me whether I was going her way, and whether she could give me a lift in her brougham.

That evening at the club I saw Culmshawe, and I don't think I quite recognized him at the first glance. I have never seen such a change wrought in a man in such a short time, and for apparently no reason whatever. The Right Honorable Peter Culmshawe, his Majesty's Secretary of State for India, had been taking what the newspapers called a well-earned rest in the south of France. He was a distinguished-looking man, tall, well-built, young-looking for his age—which was barely forty-five—clean-shaven, dark, keen-eyed, and keen-featured. This evening he looked very pale and very haggard, and, for a man who had been taking

a holiday, remarkably unhappy. He seemed hardly to notice me until I spoke to him, and then he sank into a chair beside me and groaned.

"Well, my dear fellow, I'm glad to see you back again safe and sound," said I, with assumed cheerfulness. "Been enjoying yourself? Had a good time, I hope, and——"

"My dear North," said Culmshawe, in a voice that was fairly hollow, "I am a ruined man."

"A ruined man? What do you mean?" I exclaimed aghast.

"Hush! Not so loudly, for Heaven's sake!" He laid his hand on mine. "It's all up, North," he whispered. "I've been fighting against it for over a year. The blow has fallen, and I've come back to—to take my punishment. To-morrow—yes, to-morrow, North, everyone will know."

"My dear Culmshawe, what are you talking about? What is it? Political?" I looked at him sharply. His manner, his words, and his changed appearance worried me. "Have you rushed your helpless country into war?"

He shook his head.

"I've been to Monte Carlo," he said.

"An excellent place in which to spend a holiday," I agreed.

"A hell upon earth," he cried bitterly. "It finished me."

"You mean that——"

"That I've lost more than I ever had; more than I can ever pay."

I did not say anything. We looked at each other in silence. Culmshawe nodded grimly.

"And that's not all," he said fiercely; "there's something more."

"Well?"

He glanced apprehensively around.

"My dear North, I've been a fool—a criminal fool. You know Mrs. Lemaire?"

"Miriam Lemaire? Of course," I answered, and bent forward. "But what has she to do with it? Surely you and she——"

"Yes, that's it," he answered quickly. "I owe her tens of thousands. Several of her bills are due to-morrow. I hoped to be able to pay them. I meant to do so; that is why I went to Monte Carlo. I made a bold bid and—lost!"

"What do you intend to do?" I asked.

"Resign to-night, take the Chiltern Hundreds, and disappear. Or——"

“Or what?”

“There is another way, North—another way.” He nodded gloomily. “When a man comes to the end of his rope, he may as well hang himself as let anyone else do it for him. I’m in a hole. I shall never come out of it. A revolver——”

“Don’t talk like that,” I said angrily. “You are mad.”

Culmshawe’s words and manner were strangely impressive. Peter Culmshawe, the brilliant young minister, with the world at his feet, a man who, at the age of forty-five, had reached what he set out to attain, was now reduced to this. It was frightful.

He and I had been old friends. He was older than I by a few years, still younger than I in many things. And Peter Culmshawe was disgraced.

I remembered then that someone, long ago, had told me that he was Miriam Lemaire’s dupe. Had it been true? A year or more back of this night he had been at her house on the evening of what might have been a tragedy, had not the great doctors restored Olga Kaulbach to health so completely that her voice is

this day more magnificent than ever before—the evening when von Held shot himself.

So it had been going on all this time.

Our conversation was cut short by a servant bringing in a telegram for Culmshawe. He tore it open absently, looked at it, and sank lower in his chair—crumpled, I had almost said. I was watching him closely. Then he rose and looked at me.

“This telegram is my death warrant, North.”

“From whom does the warrant come?” I asked.

“Miriam Lemaire,” he answered, and held out his hand. I took it.

“Culmshawe, old man,” I said, “I’m sorry. Can I help you—do anything for you? I am a poor man, but if a few thousand——”

He laughed aloud, and several men looked up from their papers.

“A few thousand?” he said bitterly. “Thanks, North, thanks. You don’t understand. How should you understand? Good-bye.”

“Culmshawe, be sensible,” I cried, and attempted to detain him, to follow him, but he was gone.

Young Onslow nodded to me.

"Culmshawe's off his head a bit about something, is n't he? I wonder what it is? I don't see anything out of the usual in the evening papers."

I saw no reason to discuss the matter with Onslow, and merely assented to his suggestion. But I thought a great deal and wondered. The hand of Miriam Lemaire was in this—it was coming to be in everything. She was a growing power over the lives and destinies of men and women. Already she had nearly succeeded in killing one of my dearest friends. I knew that she was guilty of the ruin and death of von Held. Was she to be the cause of the ruin and death of Peter Culmshawe?

It was natural that on this particular evening the Gorleston murder case should be the principal topic of conversation in the restaurants, drawing-rooms, and clubs of London. Everyone knew Gorleston. He was a man you had dined with, played billiards with, ridden with, and shot with—a man whom few knew as a friend, yet many as an acquaintance.

The facts of the distressing case were briefly these. They were simple, too, and it was just because they were so terribly simple that Gorles-

ton had such difficulty in making anything like an adequate defence.

Sir Richard Gorleston, an old sporting baronet of considerable wealth, was staying at his place in Yorkshire, and his nephew and several other people were staying with him over the week-end. On the afternoon of the murder, witnesses had overheard Sir Richard and his nephew quarrelling violently over money matters. Young Gorleston had demanded a certain sum of money. Old Gorleston had refused it, and, moreover, had threatened to cut young Gorleston off with a penny, whereat young Gorleston had retorted savagely and strode away.

That evening Gorleston junior had not appeared at the dinner table, and to questions asked by various people Sir Richard had said that he neither knew nor cared where his nephew was, so everyone knew they had quarrelled.

About half-past eleven that night, while most of the guests were in the billiard room and Sir Richard was in his study, a pistol shot had been heard, the sound coming from Sir Richard's room.

Servants and guests rushed there in alarm, to find Sir Richard lying dead, shot through the

head; the French windows leading onto the terrace were open, and a man, whom no one recognized, was seen running across the lawn.

They gave chase in vain, but a revolver which had been discarded by the fugitive was picked up in the shrubbery, and identified beyond doubt as belonging to young Gorleston. Only one chamber of the weapon held an empty cartridge.

What more was needed. Young Gorleston was arrested at his chambers in London early the next morning.

And his defence? That he had left the place several hours before the murder; that he was in town at the time it was committed, he having gone in by the 5:15 train from Milford—a statement, or series of statements, however, which could neither be corroborated nor yet successfully refuted. No one saw him leave Milford, no one saw him arrive at his London chambers; his man had been left at Sir Richard's. On the whole, it was a faulty defence, and fell through.

"If only the poor wretch could have proved an *alibi*," said Spindrift, K. C., to me at the Carlton, later on that evening. "It only needed a living witness, for, of course, his defence is

quite possible. He had time to go to town; and, even admitting the quarrel, and the fact that he inherits the old man's money, these are not conclusive. If anyone had seen him in town at the time of the murder, it would have saved him."

I shook my head.

"There's the revolver," I said.

"Of course," said Spindrift, "the witness would have to be reliable, above all suspicion—a man whose word could not be doubted. Yes, North, that man could have saved him; and, mark you, that was what his counsel worked upon for all he was worth. Where was that man? Gorleston could think of none, and none came forward. The only assumption is that no one saw him, and—that is an assumption. If his defence is true, we'll be hanging an innocent man."

"Do you mean to say that one's man unsubstantiated word would make the difference?" I asked.

"It would depend on the man, of course," said the lawyer. "As I have said, it would have to be someone whose word would stand; someone who knows Gorleston. He is well known.

Anyone might have seen him, if he was in town."

"Anyhow, it's too late to talk of that now," I said, still somewhat incredulous; personally, I had not the slightest doubt of Gorleston's guilt.

But imagine my utter surprise and amazement when, in the noonday edition of the *Pall Mall Gazette* of the next day, I read this most extraordinary statement:

"A most sensational development has occurred in connection with the Gorleston murder case. Yesterday the prisoner was found guilty and sentenced to death; but late last night Mr. Peter Culmshawe, the Secretary of State for India, came forward and swore before the Home Secretary that he had seen Gorleston in London at the very time the murder was committed.

"Mr. Peter Culmshawe has been out of England, taking a well-earned holiday, and his timely arrival has something of the dramatic about it. It is the very finger of fate.

"Such evidence, coming from such a source, and supporting as it does the condemned man's defence, has naturally produced a great impression, as well as something in the nature of panic among the law officers of the crown. It

is a conclusive and unimpeachable *alibi*, and, of course, Mr. Gorleston—or Sir Robert Gorleston, as he now is—will be forthwith released.”

As I read the type became blurred, and the paper dropped from my hands. What did it mean? Three things flashed through my mind. I thought of Gorleston; I thought of Culmshawe and of our conversation of last night—and then I thought of Miriam Lemaire.

Five minutes afterwards Culmshawe himself came into my room. He was still looking very pale and he was evidently excited.

“I have come, North, to ask you as a special favor to forget our conversation of last night at the club,” he said. “I was mad—drunk—I know not what; but, for Heaven’s sake, you must forget it—obliterate it from your mind.”

“I think I have already forgotten,” I answered rather frigidly, “in the surprise this announcement has caused me.” I pointed to the *Pall Mall*.

Culmshawe’s smile was ghastly.

“Strange, isn’t it,—very strange! You know I—I had n’t an idea last night when I got back, I——”

“My dear Culmshawe,” I said, “pray do

not take the trouble to explain. Surely you need not justify your actions to me. I only hope that you are sure of what you are doing. To go down on this is, I take it, worse than the other. Men do not easily forgive a perjurer."

"It will save his life," he said doggedly; and then sharply: "How do you know that it is n't true?"

"Because at the time you swore you saw Gorleston in London," I said quietly, "you happened to be in my rooms."

Culmshawe staggered back.

"So you remember?" he said hoarsely.

"I remember," was all I said.

"But, man, you—you won't speak!" he cried. "I trust you. My honor, my life is in your hands."

"I really cannot pretend to understand you?" I said coldly. "You have stated under oath that you saw Gorleston in London at a certain hour on the night of the murder. The world believes you. You are a great man. My word against yours? The idea is ridiculous! Only, my dear Culmshawe, don't take me for a complete fool. What about Mrs. Lemaire?"

"You must forget what I told you last night," he cried fiercely. "I don't owe Miriam Lemaire a penny. It was a lie. It—it——"

"I understand," I said. "You have redeemed your promissory notes. Well and good. I congratulate you. You are not ruined. You will still continue to be his Majesty's minister. You will not take the Chiltern Hundreds, nor will that weapon you hinted at be called into use. It is well. And Gorleston? Well, Gorleston is free. Good Heaven, Culmshawe, you have paid for your folly!"

He turned on his heel.

"Good-bye," he said, "and remember—forget!"

Before dinner that day Gorleston was a free man. He had been released on an order from the Home Secretary. One of his Majesty's ministers had saved him.

The next day was Miriam Lemaire's "At Home," and I called. Ordinarily, I should not have done so. On this occasion I felt irresistibly drawn to the house in Park Street. I felt that I wanted to confirm my conclusion in the Gorleston-Culmshawe case.

There were not many callers, and I managed

to have a few moments *tête-à-tête* with Miriam Lemaire herself.

"So, you see, our poor, dear friend Gorleston was innocent after all," she began, looking at me keenly.

"Yes," I said.

"What a wonderfully lucky thing it was that Culmshawe should have remembered seeing him on that night!"

"It was very wonderful, almost miraculous," I admitted.

She smiled.

"Of course, you understand?" she said in a whisper, coming close to me, so that her warm breath was upon my cheek.

"I don't quite know what you mean," I said, purposely prevaricating.

"Oh, yes, you do, Mr. North; you know very well, indeed."

"How do you know?"

"From my inner consciousness in the first place, and from the lips of our dear friend, Culmshawe, in the second."

Again I started.

"I sincerely hope," I said, "that you are not proposing to drag me into this monstrous affair."

“Not at all. Why should you suspect it? Only I wanted to thank you for saying—nothing. You understand? And at the same time I wanted to give you the explanation.”

I nodded, and she went on.

“I knew that nothing short of the word of a man like Culmshawe could save Gorleston,” she said quietly. “So I bought Culmshawe, you understand. I am no longer his creditor. He discharged his debts in—well, in the way I indicated. He didn’t want to,” she added musingly.

“But what was your object?”

“To save Gorleston. I am very fond of the boy, and he once did me a good turn. Ah, you don’t understand what he might have done to me had he wished! Every moment of that trial was one long suspense. Had Gorleston chosen, he could have produced proofs that he owed me large sums of money; that he had been borrowing of me for two years; that he was getting deeper and deeper into debt; that”—her voice failed—“that it nearly turned his brain; mad fool that he was, he actually stooped to this! Can you understand how I should have looked if they had known? Imagine my cross-

examination!" She shivered. "Yes, Gorleston held me in his hand. He could have spoken, and—I should have been disgraced—broken, as you say of a man. He did not speak. He went down to the very depths without speaking, and I swore to repay him. You saw once what I do to my enemies. You have seen now what I can do for my friends when I will."

"And what about Culmshawe?" I queried.

She shrugged her shoulders.

"He need not trouble either of us. He has served his purpose and mine."

"And Gorleston?"

"Is a young man for whom I entertain a certain—perhaps very foolish—regard. He will be here this afternoon, I hope."

"I don't think I care to meet him," I said, and rose to go.

The next day I met an acquaintance in the Strand.

"Have you heard the news?" he asked.

"I am always hearing news," I answered. "What is it now?"

"That chap Gorleston has committed suicide!"

I went very cold and walked on.

That night I saw Culmshawe. I had received a wire from him asking me for the sake of old times to call at his house in Richmond Terrace. I called.

"Read that, North," he said, handing me a letter.

"From whom?" I asked.

"Gorleston," he said. "It came through the post. I see that he shot himself this morning, leaving, so the papers say, no communication."

I read the letter, which was short and to the point. Here it is:

"My dear Culmshawe,—When you receive this I shall be a dead man. You told a lie to save me; for what reason I don't know. If she bought your *alibi*, then I am glad that I still have the strength to refuse her gift. I was in her power. I had borrowed money of her again and again. I sank deeper and deeper, and at last the time came when I had to pay. I could not. I tried to get Sir Richard to save me. He refused. Then I went mad and killed him. I am no coward; I am willing to die. Later on, some time when things are put right, perhaps the Almighty will judge between us all—perhaps—who knows? I loved her, and

did all in my power to keep her out of it. Culmshawe, for my sake, do the same. This letter is for you, and you alone. When you have read it, destroy it and forget all about me. Good-bye, and many thanks for what you tried to do.

“R. P. GORLESTON.”

I looked at the Indian Secretary. He had risen.

“Now you see,” he said.

“I see,” I answered. “And what are you going to do?”

“That you shall also see,” he said.

And I did. That evening’s paper announced the sudden and inexplicable resignation of a brilliant and popular supporter of the Government, the Right Honorable Peter Culmshawe, and his acceptance of the Chiltern Hundreds.

Six months afterwards, Peter Culmshawe was forgotten by all save the few who had known him personally. He had left public life, and was, so they said, writing a book in Algiers.

Once, a long time afterwards, I heard Mrs. Lemaire mention his name.

“Ah,” she said, “there was a man! He might have been the greatest English statesman of his time if he had only been a little wiser. But men are such fools.”

IV

“WHEN GREEK MEETS GREEK”

THE idea had long been shaping itself in my mind that Miriam Lemaire was working for some definite end—that her mission and object in life was something more than the mere increasing of her already vast wealth. She had carried on her business in a perfectly legitimate manner for several years, lending money to men and women on note-of-hand or on security, as the circumstances demanded, and charging what must in fairness be admitted to be a very reasonable rate of interest. I may briefly mention three instances which came under my personal knowledge.

Ferrars was at Ostend one August. He gambled a little, lost a lot, and borrowed £700 from Mrs. Lemaire, who was staying at the Splendid. He repaid the loan, with interest at the rate of ten per cent., within a week. Moderate, do you say? Yes, as usurers' rates go; very moderate indeed.

Then, again, there was the case of Olga Kaulbach. She borrowed the enormous sum of £20,000 at five per cent., and repaid every penny, with interest, within a month. And then there was the case of the Countess of St. Teath. It is true that this was a transaction which involved only a matter of £350. It was a temporary convenience. It enabled her to save her family seat, and incidentally her honor. She also repaid the money with interest when it was due.

These are only a few of many instances of the same kind, and in this way Miriam Lemaire lived, prospered, and grew richer

And yet, for all that, I knew that there was something else. The woman when I first met her was little short of a millionaire. Was her occupation her amusement? I could not think so, because all the actual business details were managed by her secretaries, and she lived the life of an ordinary woman of the world. Did she wish to be still richer? That hardly seemed possible, because she did not nearly live up to her income. Was she hoarding money? I could not think so, because she was generous to the last degree, and her name was at the head

of all subscription lists; while by her life she showed the world she cared nothing for money for money's sake.

I think she must have been one of those women who cannot live without intrigue of some sort; and if it did not come to her without her seeking, then she sought it herself. Still this left much unexplained, and it was one bright March day, in Nice, that I first got something of a clue to Miriam Lemaire's aim in life.

She had rented the Villa Volta for two months. I was staying at the Excelsior Regina; and on that sunny March day after lunch, as I was sitting smoking and reading the papers, I observed a very extraordinary looking man regarding me with undisguised interest. He was smoking a large cigar, and there was something about his appearance that was familiar to me. I knew his face, and yet at the same time I felt quite convinced that he was not an acquaintance.

He was a small, thick-set, portly man, with a red flabby face, dark greasy hair, watery eyes, pendulous lips, and an enormous nose. He was furiously overdressed. He wore white duck trousers, white patent boots with green

uppers, a florid waistcoat of a most wonderful pattern, an enormous gold chain and fob, a great diamond in his shirt, another in a pink tie, while two still larger stones were gleaming on his puffy fingers. He wore a blue-and-white striped flannel coat, and a gray felt hat with the Zingari colors. His costume fairly shouted to the world at large, and he smelt of stale cigars and brilliantine.

I was eyeing him surreptitiously, and wondering whether I had seen him on the stage, when, to my surprise and no little embarrassment, he spoke to me in a thick but rather pleasant voice.

"I believe," said he, raising the gray felt hat, "that I am addressing Mr. North?"

"You are, sir," I replied, acknowledging his salutation; "and you have the advantage of me."

"May be, may be," he said, with an unctuous smile. "Let it pass. I hope you won't think that I am presuming too far in addressing you?"

"Not at all; why should I?" I said.

"You say you don't know me?"

"I didn't say so, but I don't."

The stranger looked grieved. It seemed to

me at the moment that my repulse was a little shock to his pride; but he said pleasantly enough:

"Well, to be sure. Now I thought everyone knew me, by sight at least. Still, let it pass. I will introduce myself. My name is Harris—Phil Harris."

"Of course," I said, and at once remembered; "Phil Harris, the money lender."

Mr. Harris colored with conscious pride.

"The same, Mr. North. I lend money; I am a financial agent. And, what's more," he exclaimed, with a sudden change of manner, "I'm as good as any of you for all that, when it comes to the point. I could buy you, and a dozen more of you, off your legs in the winking of an eye, if I cared to."

"I am sure you could, always providing we were for sale," I said, smiling. "But was that the particular thing you wished to tell me, Mr. Harris?"

The man dropped his offensive tone.

"I beg your pardon," he said. "You must excuse me; I'm upset to-day. I'm an irritable man. Let it pass. Now, if I am not mistaken you know Mrs. Miriam Lemaire, don't you?"

"I do," I said, starting at the mention of a name that was actually in my thoughts at that moment.

"Well, if you do, why should n't I—eh?"

"Pardon me if I fail quite to grasp your meaning, Mr. Harris," I said coldly.

"Well, what's the difference between her and me, I should like to know?" he asked doggedly. "She and me is the same, are n't we? What's the difference?"

I denied myself the smile his bald egotism evoked and waited for him to continue, which he did.

"She's a money lender, is n't she? A bigger one than I am, too. You deny it—eh? What? Of course she is."

"Indeed!" I said meekly. "Since you say it, it must be so. You appear to know."

"Oh, yes, and you know too, just as well and better than I do, and it's no good pretending that you don't. You can't kid me, you know."

"Well," I said, "is this what you wanted to say?"

"No, it is n't," he said. "I wanted you to do me a special favor. Here's my card." He lowered his voice, and the pupils of his watery

eyes contracted. "If it's a question of pounds, shillings, and pence, don't let that stand in your way. I'll make it worth your while."

I stared at him in bewilderment.

"I don't understand you," I said. "What are you driving at?"

"Well, will you do me a favor, Mr. North?" he asked bluntly.

The directness of his question took me off my guard for a moment and I said:

"Of course—anything in reason that is in my power, naturally."

"Then introduce me to Miriam Lemaire—eh? What? No? Why not? It would be easy—as easy as owing money. Bring about an introduction in a casual manner, you understand. Or any other way; I don't mind, so long as I'm in a position to speak to her as an equal for a minute. What do you say? If you doubt my sincerity, look here, Mr. North. I'll strike a straight bargain with you, now, on the nail. If you'll do what I ask I'll give you my cheque for a thousand. That's fair and square, and here's my hand on it."

I did not take his fat hand. The fellow had taken my breath. I stared at him blankly.

Miriam Lemaire might be a person for whom I had not the slightest respect; indeed, she was a woman whom I knew to be utterly unworthy in the only sense in which it is worth while to be worthy. Yet, for all that, I could not ignore the fact that she was brilliant, witty, clever, and a creature who lived in another world than that inhabited by this vulgar, overdressed man. His suggestion was repulsive; but I did not tell Mr. Harris so. His request and his manner, and perhaps the man himself, interested me and aroused my curiosity. What had he to do with Miriam Lemaire, or she with him? I felt that I should like to continue the conversation, but I said:

“I think you are mistaken in your man, sir.”
Then I rose.

“Very well,” said Mr. Harris. “No offence. Let it pass. Pray oblige me by forgetting our conversation.”

“That will not be difficult,” I retorted, and walked away.

Afterwards I wondered what the man Phil Harris wanted. The more I thought of him the more I saw that he was not to be despised. Beneath his unprepossessing exterior I per-

ceived strength; dogged, bull-dog determination. If he meant to know Mrs. Lemaire, I felt pretty certain that he would succeed.

I saw Miriam Lemaire at luncheon that day. She looked magnificent in white silks, and she was making a great deal of a rather undersized and foolish youth who evidently worshipped her. The youth I knew by name and sight. I had seen a good deal of him during my stay at the Regina, and he appeared to have quantities of money to waste. His name was Gandy, and he was, I understood, an officer in the 23rd Lancers.

Neither he nor Mrs. Lemaire saw me. They were evidently too occupied with their *bouchées d'huîtres* and conversation to notice me. Whether it was fate or merely the waiter who was responsible, I know not; but I found myself sitting at the table next to theirs, and separated from them only by a screen.

For some minutes their conversation reached me in a confused murmur, for I was not listening to them. On the contrary, I was remarking what wonderfully pretty eyes a little French girl at a neighboring table had. But suddenly a detached word or two reached me, and I listened.

"I tell you, my dear Charlie, you must manage to square up—somehow or other; I don't care how. I must have the money! That's the long and short of the matter—there!"

It was Miriam Lemaire who was speaking, and the hard tone was quite apparent in her lovely voice.

"You must really understand that I have waited a most unconscionably long time," she went on. "It is hardly fair. I want the money, and I must have it."

"I know I am a cad," said the man dejectedly; "but I have had such beastly luck. As a matter of fact, my dear Mrs. Lemaire, I can't possibly manage it—I can't!"

"You must," she said, and her tone was incisive.

"But what am I to do?"

"Merely pay me what you owe me," was the blunt answer.

The waiter whisked away my omelette almost untouched. I was listening—eavesdropping, despite myself.

"Can't you wait another week?" asked Gandy desperately.

"Not another day," said Miriam Lemaire. "I am hard up. I have been losing a lot lately, and last night at the tables— Bah! that's nothing to do with it, after all. The money is long overdue. I was willing up to a certain point to oblige you. The time is up. You must contrive it somehow; the manner of it is not my business. I have n't had a penny of it yet, and——"

"But I've tried to make it up to you in other ways," urged the boy.

"I admit that you have been very good," said Mrs. Lemaire; "and I am not forgetting it. You managed to get me included in the Duke's yachting party. I am not unmindful of the fact that you have also proved yourself a most agreeable host on many occasions."

"And then," said Gandy, "there is the Vischoyle affair."

"Oh, dear me, yes; still, all this does n't affect the question at all. I must have the money, Charlie, and you must get it."

"Then I am a ruined man," he said with a groan.

I caught my breath. I had lost all inclina-

tion to eat. I was wondering how much Gandy owed, and how he was going to pay it.

That evening I was at Monte Carlo, and I met Mrs. Lemaire. She was flushed and excited, and she was playing *trente et quarante* a little wildly. Also she was losing heavily.

A good many people were watching her, and among them I observed my friend of the morning, Mr. Phil Harris, with an enormous diamond stud in the centre of a capacious shirt-front. He nodded affably to me, as if to say: "You watch. You shall see more of me."

The possibility of Miriam Lemaire's ever running short of money had never for a moment entered my brain until the conversation I had overheard at the luncheon table; and her plea of being hard up I had interpreted as an excuse for pressing the boy, Gandy, for the payment of his loan.

I looked around for Gandy. He was not in sight. The old Earl of Vischoyle was Mrs. Lemaire's escort.

Miriam Lemaire was playing her well-known system, and I watched her for over half an hour. She must have lost forty thousand francs before she turned to leave the table.

And then it was that a very curious thing happened. Mr. Phil Harris forced his way past two or three people to her side.

"Madam," he said, "pardon my presumption, but I have been watching your play; go on; keep it up. You must win. Luck must turn."

"I can't," she said, looking askance at him.

"Then be good enough to play for me," he said. "I know your system, and I believe in fate."

She turned her flashing eyes upon him, and perhaps the scintillating diamond in the white shirt-front dazzled her. I thought I saw her fine nostrils quiver as the pungent scent of the brilliantined head assailed them.

"Sir, how dare you!" said the Earl, but she stopped him.

"All right," she said; "I'll do it. *Mon Dieu!* Why should n't I?"

Harris put down a bundle of notes.

"There are ten thousand francs," he said.

"Thanks," she said, laughing a little hysterically.

Ten minutes afterwards she had lost every penny.

Harris promptly put down another bundle.

"Luck must turn," he whispered. "Play."

"It's your money," she said wildly. "I don't mind."

Ten minutes afterwards she had lost the second ten thousand.

"Double the stakes," said Harris, and placed a handful of twenty-franc pieces on the table.

"I can't," she said huskily. "I dare not."

"Play," said Harris fiercely; "play, I say!"
I held my breath.

The first stake came in, and the next, and the next. She laughed. From that moment she won steadily. She played for half an hour, and when she stopped she stood 180,000 francs to the good.

Mr. Harris stood by her side. She thanked him unsteadily, and pointed to the huge pile of gold and notes.

"There are your winnings," she said.

"No, madam, surely; they are your winnings. But for you——"

The Earl scowled. Mr. Harris was cramming the money into his pocket. Mrs. Lemaire's eyes lighted up balefully.

"Who are you?" she asked.

Mr. Harris smiled.

“My name is Gandy,” he said. “I believe you know my son, Mrs. Lemaire?”

He looked her straight in the eyes and walked away, and left her clutching at the Earl’s arm and staring blankly at the curious crowd around her.

Harris brushed past me, and I, moved by an irresistible impulse, caught his arm.

“Look here,” I said; “what does all this mean?”

“If you are curious, and care to come outside and have a cup of coffee, I’ll tell you,” he answered. And together we left the overheated gaming-rooms.

“You see, Mr. North,” said he, when we were in the café, “that I have effected the introduction without anyone’s help. I thought I should. Miriam Lemaire will not forget me, eh? No, I think not. But let that pass. I have not done with her yet, by a long way. I came to Monte Carlo with an object. Miriam Lemaire is a clever woman; still, I flatter myself that I ain’t a fool.”

“A case of ‘when Greek meets Greek’—eh?”

“Exactly.”

“But your name—Gandy, you said? And yet——”

“My real name is Gandy; my professional name is Harris.” He lowered his voice. “Not a word to a soul. You understand? I tell you this in strict confidence. Not a soul knows it—not even my own son.”

“Good Heavens! You mean to say that you—you are the father of Charlie Gandy, of the 23rd Lancers?”

“I do, sir,” replied Mr. Harris, with undisguised pride. “That is one of the reasons I’m here. You know him? Good; all the more reason why I should tell you. He owes her—well, never mind how much. It’s a lot. He has n’t a penny. I am sure of it. He can’t get a penny. I’m also sure of that. I’ve arranged it so. Now, listen. He’s the only son of his poor dead mother”—Mr. Harris’s voice softened—“my only son. I’ve educated him, done all I could for him, given him all that money could give; and now I see him going straight to the dogs, all through this vampire woman. It was time to interfere. But how? Says I to myself: ‘Phil Gandy,

you've got to do this thing properly, or else you'll make such a mess of it as you'd better never have started. The Lemaire is deep. You've got to be simply fathomless. She is rich—so are you; but you can't beat her on that score. For every fiver you can put up, she can swamp you with a hundred. You must wait a bit. You must just break her.'

"Then, again, it must be done without my son knowing who is doing it. I've paid his debts once before. I said I would never do it again, and I mean it, and he knows it. He's never asked me. But I know just how matters stand. I've got agents. And, what's more, I happen to know how things have been going with the Lemaire lately. She's my rival and I've been steadily undermining her, though she does not know it. I've waited for this moment. I've got her in my hand. It's me or her—that's what it's come to. One of us will have to go to the wall after to-morrow."

"I confess," I said, "that I do not quite follow you. What do you intend to do? As far as I can see, all you can do is to go and pay your son's debts, and get his promissory notes from her."

"Not at all," said Mr. Harris; "that's not my game. I'm going to lend her money! Yes, what do you think of that? I've worked up to this point. Miriam Lemaire is going to borrow money from me at fifteen per cent. Ha! ha! how does that strike you? We'll see who will win. She's been ruining my business for a long time. Now I'm going to smash her. I've observed things. She's dropped a tremendous lot lately, and nothing can stand against a bad turn of luck. That fellow Gorleston owed her something like eighteen thousand pounds. She never got a penny of it, and never will. And there are several other little things I happen to know. Since she's been here, she's dropped something like eight hundred thousand francs at the tables. Now I know Miriam Lemaire. Once you get her gambling, she'll never stop. I've waited and watched. She's got to the end of her tether."

"I shall be interested to see how the duel ends," I said.

"If you want to see the result," said Mr. Harris, "you'd better meet me here at this time to-morrow night."

"It's an appointment," I agreed, and we parted.

I met young Gandy the next morning on the promenade. He looked ill.

When I kept my appointment with Mr. Harris the next night at the Café de Paris, I found, to my surprise, that he was sitting there with a woman, and the woman was Miriam Lemaire.

I joined them. I found that she and Harris were apparently on the best of terms.

We chatted about everything in general and nothing in particular for a few minutes, and then Miriam Lemaire rose.

"Mr. North," she said, "will you take me back to the rooms? I have to meet a friend. Good-bye, Mr. Harris—or Gandy—which is it?"

"Harris, if you please," said the money lender, drawing hard at his cigar.

I looked from one to the other. What had happened?

"Come, Mr. North," said Mrs. Lemaire. "Again good-night, Mr. Harris." And she smiled sweetly.

"*Au revoir*, dear lady," said Harris, rising and bowing with exaggerated politeness. She winced and took my arm.

"I shall be here, Mr. North," said Harris, "when you are disengaged." And I noticed that there was a note of triumph in his voice. Again I asked myself what had happened.

On our way back to the Casino Miriam Lemaire said:

"Mr. North, do you know that odious man?"

"I met him yesterday at my hotel," I answered, a little embarrassed. "And I saw the incident at the Casino last night."

"You know who he is?"

"Yes," I answered. "He is Charlie Gandy's father."

"We have been having a sort of duel," she admitted, with a sharp little laugh.

"Who won?" I asked.

"At present that unspeakable old boor is laboring under the impression that he has; but I fancy he is mistaken."

"What do you mean?"

"Can I trust you?"

"You know best," I answered.

She put her hand into the folds of her opera cloak and drew forth a crumpled letter.

"Take that," she said, "and promise me that you will give it to the boor."

I promised, and, when I had handed Mrs. Lemaire over to the tender mercies of the decrepit Vischoyle, I returned to Mr. Harris.

"Well?" I asked, carelessly. "Who won?"

He removed his cigar and smiled fatuously.

"I've saved the boy," he cried, with undisguised satisfaction. "Paid his debts and interest, and—and lent her fifteen thousand pounds. How's that for a win—eh? Congratulate me, Mr. North."

I did not do so; indeed, I saw no cause for his triumphant manner, but I asked him where his son was. At the moment I had forgotten the letter I had to give him.

"I don't know, and don't much care," said Harris. "The young scamp is able to look after himself. All I know is that I have recovered his paper. He's out of her clutches."

"Does he know?"

"No; not yet. I have left her to tell him," he said with a chuckle. "As for me, I leave by the mail for Genoa to-night."

A sudden movement of the crowd of promenaders, a sudden hush in the babble of conversation, caused me look around.

Some gendarmes were carrying something on a stretcher.

"What's up?" I asked of the first man who entered.

"Some poor beggar's shot himself in the gardens," was the answer.

I felt a sudden chill run down my spine, and I looked at Harris. He was smoking complacently.

"Who is it?" he asked.

"An Englishman—young chap named Gandy, of the——"

Harris leapt to his feet with a sharp cry of horror.

"He's been playing high, and he's lost a lot," said the man. "They say he owes a lot of money, too, poor chap. I hear his father is here. It's a beastly business."

Then I remembered the letter Miriam Lemaire gave me for him.

"Mr. Harris," I said, "read that. Mrs. Lemaire gave it to me to give to you."

Harris steadied himself, looked at the letter and groaned.

"It's my poor boy's writing," he said, and read aloud:

"When you get this, I shall be out of the way. I can't pay you, Miriam. I am ruined, and there is no other way. I have been a fool and I am not brave enough to face it. I have asked my father for the money, but it is no good. It is too much, and I dare not tell him all. I hope you are satisfied.

"C. GANDY."

"Good God!" moaned Harris. "And she—she knew this when she was sitting there! She took my money when she knew he was dead! She's beaten me! Oh, my poor boy—my poor boy!"

He gulped down a glass of brandy, then rose and staggered out to follow the gendarmes and their burden.

That night Miriam Lemaire broke the bank at roulette.

V

THE INCIDENT OF THE ROYAL PERSONAGE

DENTON was a second cousin of mine, and I was rather proud of him, which is rather unusual, since one is not generally proud of one's relatives.

He was at the Paris Embassy, occupying a position that is generally associated with a man quite fifteen years his senior. But Denton was a coming man. Everyone said so.

He was dining with me at Ritz's, and he had grown a little communicative—a thing a young diplomat ought never to do. But we knew each other pretty well, and Hugh was good enough to say that he had always looked upon me as a safe man.

"Do you happen to know a good money lender?" he asked, when the conversation began to flag.

I regarded him severely.

"That's a nice thing for a man in your position to ask."

"Which is n't answering my question," said Denton, pulling coolly at his cigar.

"I asked if you know of a good money lender?"

"There is n't such a thing as a good money lender," I commented. "The species is extinct if it ever existed. Of course there are Harris and Cohen and Binger."

"I don't mean that sort of beast at all," interrupted Denton, shaking his head. "Those sharks would n't be any good for my purpose."

"What is your purpose?"

"Never you mind."

"You don't mean to say that you need to go to the Jews? You ought to be ashamed of yourself if you do—you, with your income and exalted position."

"My dear George, don't be a fool. It's not for myself at all. I am merely asking for information, and I thought you, with your experience, might happen to know someone whom no one else happens to have heard of."

"How would Mrs. Lemaire suit your mysterious purpose?" I queried laughingly.

"Mrs. Lemaire? Who's she?"

"A most charming and fascinating woman,"

I replied; "one who is possessed of great wealth, which she frequently uses to accommodate people, if it answers her purpose. Her rate of interest is moderate, and her resources appear to be unlimited."

"Is she good for twenty thousand?"

"I should n't be at all surprised," I said.

"By gad, you are n't talking of *the* Mrs. Lemaire, are you?"

I nodded. Denton whistled softly, and then smiled.

"North," he said, "I believe she's the identical person I want."

"Look here, my good fellow," I said; "don't you have anything to do with her. Take my advice. For myself, I should be extremely sorry to have any financial dealings with her."

"Can you introduce me?"

"I can, but I won't, unless you tell me what you are up to. I would n't for worlds."

Denton looked offended.

"You're a curious chap, George," he said. "What's wrong with Mrs. Lemaire? I know several people who know her."

"So do I," I retorted; "and I happen to know several people who would give a good

deal not to have known her. Look here—I'll tell you a thing or two in exchange for your confidence. I admit that I am exceedingly interested in Mrs. Lemaire. In fact, she's rather a hobby of mine. I'm observing her. I should like one day to put her into book form. But what do you want to know her for?"

"If I tell you, you will tell me what you know?" he asked.

"Certainly. It's a bargain."

"As a matter of fact," said Denton, "I happen to know a certain lady whose name, if I tell you, you must swear to keep a profound secret."

"Naturally. This is between ourselves."

"Good. You know Lady Delabole?"

I nodded. "The wife of our Ambassador at Berlin—a most charming woman. Well?"

Denton lowered his voice. "She is a particular friend of mine. I may tell you in confidence that I owe a very great deal to her in many ways. She is my 'friend at court'; and I may also tell you that hitherto I have never been able to recompense her in any way—not, of course, that she expects it. We are great friends—that is all."

"Yes, but what has that to do with Miriam Lemaire?" I interpolated.

"Everything in the world," continued Denton. "And now I reach a point when I absolutely cannot mention names."

"You know best," I said. "Go on."

"Well, I learn that a certain Royal Personage is in immediate need of private funds, which must be obtained secretly, you understand. It is to be merely a temporary convenience, and the fortunate lender will be able to make a good thing out of it. The matter is urgent—in fact, it's a question of days. You follow me?"

"Vaguely," I assented, somewhat bewildered. "Who the dickens is the mysterious Royal Personage?"

"That," said Denton, "you must not ask me. Surely you appreciate the position. There are some confidences that——"

"Of course," I interrupted; "I understand." I thought I had a pretty shrewd idea whom he meant. "But for all that, I don't understand where Lady Delabole comes in. What has the wife of the British Ambassador at Berlin to do with the unfortunately impecunious Royal Personage?"

"Lady Delabole," said Denton, relighting his cigar, which had not, however, gone out, "will be able to accomplish a very tremendous thing if—if she can accommodate the Royal Personage."

"Oh, is that it? It seems risky."

"And," continued Denton, ignoring my interruption, "it will be very much to my advantage if I can be the means of introducing such a person as Mrs. Lemaire to Lady Delabole. Therefore, my dear George, if you will enable me to do so, you will confer upon me a favor, which I shall not forget."

"It's an extraordinarily mixed-up business," I mused, and went silent for some seconds.

Denton drank a liqueur meditatively.

"Well?" he said at last. "What do you say?"

"Say? Why, I'll just tell you one or two little stories first of all, and then, if you still ask me to introduce you—" And forthwith I gave him two or three incidents. I told him of Olga Kaulbach and von Held, of Culmshawe and poor Gorleston.

Denton's eyes sparkled, and he drank in every word.

"By Jove!" he interrupted. "The woman

must be a fiend incarnate. But she's the woman we want. George, I insist. You must introduce me to Miriam Lemaire. I'll take the risk. Where is she?"

"At the present moment," I said, "she happens to be here in Paris."

"What glorious luck!"

"She's staying with Madame la Duchesse de Grandet."

"She knows those people?" Denton appeared surprised.

"She knows everyone," I said.

"A most unique character."

"My dear Hugh, Miriam Lemaire is one woman in a century. An ordinary woman, with her past and character, would be in gaol with a dozen indictments against her. Miriam Lemaire has always been Miriam Lemaire, and she is a queen."

"Can we see her to-night?" asked Denton anxiously.

"She will be at Madame de la Rastignac's reception."

"Let us go. It is really important."

Reluctantly I consented. I have often regretted my weakness. I still regret it. So

much depended on whether I said "Yes" or "No" then, though I did not know it. It was a great mistake.

"Very well," I said; "we will go there."

An hour later I had the doubtful pleasure of watching Hugh Denton wrapped in deep conversation with Miriam Lemaire on a subject of which I was as ignorant as the man in the moon, and I became possessed of a demon of curiosity. I felt rather ashamed of myself. It was vulgar and quite unjustifiable; nevertheless, I could not shake the demon off. And the worst of it was that there appeared to be not the slightest possibility of my ever knowing any more than I did then.

Miriam Lemaire looked younger and more superbly beautiful than ever that night. She had dressed her red-gold hair differently, and it rather altered her appearance, I think—if it were possible to compare superlatives—for the better.

She was dressed in black, and very quietly, and she wore a single row of immense pearls at her throat.

Denton joined me later on, and we decided to go, though it was still early. As we left, we

passed close to her. She was talking to Sarah Bernhardt, and she laughed up into my face.

"Thanks, Mr. North," she said in a whisper, "for the first client you have ever introduced. I shall not forget. Come and see me soon."

Denton and I parted in the Rue Castiglione. We had walked, and he had talked persistently and with obvious pertinacity on English flat-racing. He did not even mention the subject which was first in my mind. I resented it.

"Good-night," he said, as he was leaving me. "Good-night, and thanks."

"But what about Miriam Lemaire?" I asked tentatively.

"It's all right," he said with a provoking smile. "She's going to—but never mind."

"But I *do* mind. I want to know more."

He shook his head and continued to smile enigmatically.

"You're a beast," I said moodily. "You might at least tell me where she's going."

"I don't mind doing that," he said, laughing. "She's going to Berlin to-morrow morning."

"And you?"

"I? Oh, I'm a fixture here till July. Good-night. I'll look you up to-morrow afternoon."

Whether Denton looked me up or not I do not know, but, if he did, the hotel porter must have told him that I had left Paris—as I had.

A spirit of madness was upon me. There are times when even a sensible and matter-of-fact man may lose his sense of proportion and of humor—times when a minor and trivial incident causes him to do things that he cannot explain or justify. I have known sober-minded men materially to disturb their peace of mind for a whim—spoil their lives for a bit of petty pique, or a smile from a ballet girl.

That night—explain it I cannot—I realized that Miriam Lemaire exercised a tremendous power over me. Yet I knew her to be a wicked and unprincipled woman, clever, brilliant, and beautiful though she was. I realized, with something of a shock, that I was one of a few besides her victims who really knew her for what she was, and I realized also that she knew this, too. I felt like her accomplice. There was a sort of fascination in the thought. It was like being a particular friend of the devil, without being quite a devil yourself.

Denton had said something to her which had

sent her to Berlin. I might be mad, but I determined to go to Berlin too.

Nothing had been further from my thoughts. I hate Berlin, and there was nothing, save an elderly aunt, to take me there. On the contrary, I was supposed to be on my way to London on business of some importance. It was my folly, and I do not pretend to explain or to justify it. I paid my bill, left the major portion of my luggage, took a dressing case and a small trunk, drove to the Gare du Nord in the morning and booked a *coupé lit* for Berlin. My man regarded the proceedings with a sagacious mistrustfulness. He knew nothing and consequently suspected all things.

I saw Miriam Lemaire and her maid at the station, but managed so that they did not see me. However, we met in the restaurant car before long. She did not appear at all surprised, though I was somewhat embarrassed.

"I had no idea that I was to have this pleasure," she said. "Are you going farther than Cologne?"

"I'm going to Berlin," I said.

She looked at me sharply.

"How very odd," she remarked. "So am I. Are you staying with friends?"

"I don't know," I answered; and then I made a bold plunge. "I had to go to Berlin suddenly. I only decided last night. I sent a wire this morning to my friend Lord Delabole asking if he would put me up. You know Lady Delabole, of course?" I watched the effect of my words.

Miriam Lemaire looked warm. Then she laughed.

"Upon my soul, Mr. North, there's no doubt about it. Fate is playing a trick with us. I'm going to stay with the Delaboles too."

"How odd a coincidence!" I said.

She frowned, and looked out of the window for a long time in silence. I watched her closely, and saw that she was disturbed. At length she turned upon me suddenly.

"Mr. North," she began, "I don't know that I have ever asked a favor of you in my life."

"If you had, it would have been granted," I said blandly. "You have but to command."

"If I could only believe you!" she murmured. Then: "At the risk of being dreadfully imper-

tinent, Mr. North, may I ask if your business in Berlin is of very great importance?"

"Fortunately, or unfortunately," I answered, "it is of extreme importance."

"Would you, if I should ask you, *pos pone* going there for twenty-four hours?"

"Do you ask me?" I said a little weakly.

"I do, Mr. North. If you will promise me not to go to Berlin until Friday, you will place me under a great obligation. Leave the train at Cologne and study the cathedral until to-morrow, or go back to Paris; in short, do anything as long as you don't go to Berlin for twenty-four hours."

"Mrs. Lemaire," I said, "if you were to tell me to go to San Francisco, I fully believe I should feel compelled to obey."

"You dear man!"

"But," I said, checking her sudden burst of gratitude, "I have a price."

She laughed. "Ask it—anything you like."

And she looked at me in a way no woman ought to look at a man.

"You will grant it?"

She nodded laughingly.

"Well, tell me why you are going to Berlin."

Her face fell. She was not expecting this, and she attempted to laugh the question aside, but I was holding her in an eye-grip.

"Well," she said suddenly, "why should I tell you a lie? I can trust you, and, after all, it's quite fair."

"It's a bargain, then," I said.

"Yes; if you are curious, I'll tell you." She glanced nervously around and dropped her voice. "I'm going to Berlin," she said, "to lend Lady Delabole some money. There! There's nothing so very terrible in that, is there?"

"But there's something more."

"Nothing—on my honor."

"What about the Royal Personage?"

Before those words were well out of my mouth, I realized what a fool I was, and would have given worlds to recall them. I felt like biting out my tongue, for the look of blank bewilderment and absolute surprise Miriam Lemaire gave me told me that, as far as she was concerned, she was going to do exactly what she had said, and nothing more.

"What Royal Personage?" she rapped out, with sharp suspicion.

"Nothing; it was only—only a—a jest," I stammered lamely.

She looked puzzled, and I cursed my consummate folly. What a cad I had been! Had not Denton bound me to secrecy?

"I will keep my bargain," I hastened to say. "I beg your pardon for being so curious."

I thought I saw a cunning gleam in her lovely witch-eyes, and I felt vaguely uneasy, for I knew that my clumsy attempt to double on my own tracks had not deceived her for a moment.

None the less, I kept my promise, stopping off at Cologne, and going from thence to England *via* Ostend, and wiring for my baggage to be sent on from Paris. Of course Miriam Lemaire went on to Berlin.

I thought a good deal about this incident for a while, but it was eventually pushed aside, until one day I saw in the newspaper that Denton had been promoted to be First Secretary of Legation at Constantinople—Denton, a mere boy with but little diplomatic experience. I will not say, however, that the choice was wrong; and he has since justified it.

But someone had pulled the wires. Who?

As if in answer to the question, I read a name

in the next announcement, which was to the effect that Lady Delabole, the wife of Lord Delabole, the Ambassador at Berlin, was staying in London for a short time.

Then I understood: Denton had got his reward!

I did not see anything of Miriam Lemaire for some weeks—in fact, not until the London season was waning, when I received a note from her asking me to dine with her.

Needless to say, I accepted the invitation, and found, when I presented myself, that we were to dine alone.

“I so arranged it, Mr. North,” she explained later, “because I want to ask you for a bit of information. You remember our journey to Berlin last spring? or, rather my journey to Berlin?”

“Yes,” I said, with difficulty restraining my eagerness. “The journey I broke at your request.”

“Quite so. You know for what purpose I was going. Well, the upshot is that Lady Delabole is my debtor to a very considerable extent—in fact, the amount is too large for my liking. I have lent her several sums of money

since then, and there seems to me to be no possibility of my ever being repaid."

"But Lady Delabole," I exclaimed, "is a rich woman. And her husband's position and——"

"That's just it. And therefore I have asked myself why she wants to borrow money. What can she possibly want funds for? The Delabole estates, the woman's own diamonds, her husband's and her own income! Mr. North, I am puzzled. It is a very serious thing to me. Perhaps I was a little unwise at the outset."

"But in what way can I help you?"

She looked at me with a question in her eyes.

"I wonder if you have a good memory?" she said.

"I have," I admitted.

"Then please explain to me what you meant by the remark you made in the train about a Royal Personage."

I affected complete ignorance of her meaning. But Miriam Lemaire was a clever woman.

"Mr. North," she said, "I demand to know. Don't pretend that you have forgotten, because I know very well that you have done nothing of the sort, and you are one of those

delightful men who can't lie, even when they try to. Now, I have reason to believe that you know why Lady Delabole has been borrowing money of me. I flatter myself that I know too, and I want to see if I am right before I do anything. You see, I have means of making inquiries in all quarters, and I know for a certainty that she is in no financial difficulties, and has never been in any. Both she and her husband are rich, and do not nearly live up to their incomes; and then—well, her position alone is sufficient. I may tell you that these transactions have been carried on perfectly legally, though somewhat mysteriously. But I need not trouble you about that."

"Tell me," I asked, "why you want me to answer your question."

"Because," she said, and her eyes lighted up suddenly, "I have a theory built on a substantial basis, which includes that chance remark of yours. Lady Delabole has been borrowing money for someone else. She is an agent, and I desire an explanation from you."

"I regret," I said firmly, "that I cannot give it."

"Why?"

"Because I am bound in honor."

"To whom?"

"I must refuse to say. The remark was unfortunate. I hoped you had forgotten it."

"Ah! then you admit the remark?"

"Since it is useless to deny it," I answered blandly.

"Very well," she said. "Then I must act alone. I do not think I am mistaken. I wanted to ask you first, because—well, because it might affect some of your friends. I should not care to injure you or them, Mr. North. That is why I have given you a chance. Still, money is money, and one's self is one's self."

"What are you going to do?" I asked cautiously. "Sue for your money?"

"Pshaw! Of course not. That would ruin me. I have never sued in law in my life. I have other ways. I have been dunning Lady Delabole for the last month. She is full of excuses. It is wait—wait—wait——"

"But surely the money is safe?"

"Perhaps; but I want it now. And then, if it doesn't depend on Lady Delabole, and Lady Delabole alone, where do I stand? The Royal Personage, if I am not mistaken, is— Ah! I see you know." She had caught my eye.

"I don't know," I exclaimed quickly. "I swear I don't know."

"But you suspect."

"That is another matter."

"Well," she said, "I'll tell you who it is you suspect."

"I am indifferent," I said carelessly, though I was nothing of the sort. "After all, it is no affair of mine."

She bent towards me and whispered a name in my ear. I started, and half rose in my chair.

"Impossible!" I cried. "I never for an instant thought *that*. It cannot be!"

"We were apparently thinking of different people," she said coolly.

"My dear Mrs. Lemaire, this is monstrous. What are you saying? How is it possible that Lady Delabole could——"

"Women, my dear Mr. North, as you will find out perhaps one day, will do a lot of queer things when it answers their purposes."

"But Lady Delabole is rich. What can she gain? Wealth? She has enough. Position—rank? All that she has—everything, in fact."

"Not everything," said Miriam Lemaire. "There is one thing she wants."

"And that is?"

"To be Vice-reine of India!"

"How can you tell?"

"I will prove it," she said, with a curious smile. "I am going to speak to the Royal Personage. A few words—a threat of exposure, and—well, it will either be the ruin of Lady Delabole, or the other thing."

"What other thing?" I gasped.

"Lord Delabole will be Viceroy of India, and I shall have my money and a few hundreds profit. You shall see."

A week afterwards I did see.

Lord Delabole was superseded at Berlin, and appointed to the Viceroyship of India, and a month afterwards the Irish estates of the Delaboles were sold for £48,000.

People remarked upon this a good deal, and never understood it. Neither did I fully, until a year afterwards, when Miriam Lemaire hinted at a few things and made obscurities clear.

"I saw the Royal Personage," she told me in answer to my question, "and let him know that I considered him, and not Lady Delabole, my creditor."

"And he paid you?"

"He couldn't. But Lady Delabole did. He made it up to her. It precipitated matters. She got what she wanted, and is probably satisfied with the bargain."

I sighed.

"I don't wonder our diplomacy is going to the dogs," I commented. "But do you mind telling me how much you made on the deal?"

She pursed her lips and thought.

"A mere matter of three hundred pounds odd," she said.

"Good Heavens! And you risked all that for such a ridiculously small sum—a woman of your wealth?"

"Of course I did," she laughed. "It is my life, my existence. I would do as much for as many shillings. Think what it means—think!"

"Yes," I admitted; "it does mean a great deal, and it is just as well that everyone does n't know how high appointments can be played for."

"It's always a mistake to look behind the scenes," said Miriam Lemaire.

VI

THE FACTS ABOUT THE VAUXMAUR PEERAGE

THE Duke of Vauxmaur was a young man of twenty-three, with a great charm of manner and a total lack of common sense. He had been born a duke—the seventh duke of his line—his father, the sixth, having died in the hunting-fields three days before his birth.

His mother, the Duchess, a pretty, empty-headed little woman, was largely responsible for the lamentable way in which his infant Grace was brought up. Hugh Hedley Pauncefort Lingard Benfort-Lingard, which was Vauxmaur's name, was spoiled consistently and uninterruptedly from the day of his birth. His nurses, acting on his mother's instructions, never corrected him; his governess let him have his own way; his tutor, a wise man in his generation, left the Duke to do as he pleased, and, thereby, grew in favor with the Duchess; the masters at Eton petted him—the Duchess so

arranged it; and when his Grace went to Oxford, he read as little as he could and spent as much as he could; whereat he became popular, for, fool though he was, he had a certain charm of manner.

He went from Oxford to Sandhurst, and from there into the Life Guards. All of which is very commonplace for a duke. Many dukes do the same. But Hugh Hedley did more—much more. Six months after he was gazetted a second lieutenant, the Duchess died and Hugh Hedley went the pace. And the pace that the young Duke of Vauxmaur set for himself crowded a sensible lifetime into a year and a half, during which time he ran through something like £500,000. Then came the time when his Grace felt a draft—a metaphorical draft, as well as a physical one. He caught pneumonia after a court ball, and recovered only to realize that he had been a stupendous fool, and that he had not nearly enough money to meet his liabilities.

He had sold several estates, historic and otherwise; the Vauxmaur investments had been disposed of; in short, the Duke stood possessed of only an entailed castle in Scotland, a ruined

manor in Essex, and a room full of bills and writs, judgment summonses and bankruptcy notices, in his chambers in Pall Mall.

And two years before this moment of cat-aclysms he had been one of the richest peers in the realm.

The Duke of Vauxmaur had awakened too late. He was face to face with a problem.

"I must either chuck everything and go out to some beastly colony," said he, "or get money."

Being a totally unpractical fool, he went to Ostend to think matters over.

It was early in June, and the real season there had not begun, so far as English visitors make the Ostend season, and it was quite by the merest stroke of chance that I crossed from Dover by the *Marie Henriette*, in which boat Vauxmaur chanced to be a passenger. We met, and I thought he looked a bit the worse for wear. I had heard of his illness, but I did not at that time take much interest in the boy. He was much my junior, and was not of my world. I remember as a youngster falling desperately in love with his empty-headed little mother.

"Hello, North, old man! How goes it?" he

exclaimed when our chance meeting was a fact accomplished. "Where are you off to?"

"To Brussels, to buy a book."

"What a bounder you are, North! Always rushing about after a book, or a print, or some grime-covered Madonna of the old masters." The boy regarded me with a gentle, patronizing pity.

"It's well to have a hobby when you get to my age," I said tolerantly. "And you? You've been ill, have n't you?"

"Infernally ill," he retorted moodily.

"You're better now, I hope. Going far?"

"To Ostend, to make up my mind whether I shall file my petition, or let someone else do it for me. North, old man, I'm a quitter. I'm broke." The hereditary legislator's language was not always parliamentary.

"You don't mean to say you've come to that, Vauxmaur?" I said, since I had to say something.

"I have. Confound it all! I've been about the biggest ass of the century."

The boy was distinctly depressed. I felt sorry for him and invited him to lunch. At table, under the expanding influence of some

very sweet and very bad champagne, he supplied me with a fairly concise history of his life, which in an abbreviated form stands at the head of this chapter.

“So you see, North, I’m on my beam ends at last. I’ve chucked the Army, and—well, I shall have to chuck everything else, as far as I can see. What can I do?”

“My dear Vauxmaur, have you ever thought of working a little—just for a change?”

“Work? You are daffy! Fancy me working!”

“I admit that imagination has its limitations,” I laughed. “Still, you are young and healthy, and——”

“Candidly, North, you don’t for an instant mean what you say?” He looked even more troubled. I verily believe the boy had never thought of work before in his life.

“I don’t think it would kill you,” I said. “Why not go to South Africa?”

“I’d sooner go to Monte Carlo.”

“You might do a bit of soldiering.”

“I’d watch it. No, North, I’m not built that way, I tell you. I’m stranded; and the logical corollary to that is that someone will have to help me.”

"Ah, I see. I was forgetting you've got a coronet. That's an asset."

"It's pawned," said Vauxmaur, with increasing melancholy. "It was one of the first things to go."

"But the principle remains," I said, endeavoring to be serious.

"Yes, by gad, and the interest accumulates."

I did not laugh any more.

"You don't understand me," I said. "You're a duke. What about the American Heiress? Have you ever thought of marriage? I believe that's the usual thing in such cases. Look at Beddington and Lamphrey and——"

"Shut up!" said Vauxmaur quietly. "That's out of the question—quite."

"Hello, you don't mean to say you're in love, as well as your other difficulties?"

"Thanks," said Vauxmaur, and his manner had changed. "I don't think we'll talk about that."

"I was merely suggesting the conventional remedy for one of your crowd," I said, laughing.

"Well, then, it's quite impossible, and that's an end of it." He looked away. I glanced at him. He was frowning tragically.

"Good Heavens, Vauxmaur, you don't mean to say you are married already?"

He started and glared at me.

"And if I am," he said, "what then?"

"Oh, nothing—nothing. I beg your pardon. I didn't know."

"I didn't say I *was* married, did I? And if I am, there's no disgrace in being married."

"Certainly not, only I hope, for the Duchess of Vauxmaur's sake, you are n't."

Vauxmaur drank more champagne, and in due course we arrived at Ostend.

"You might put in a day here and keep me company," suggested Vauxmaur. "It's a beastly dull hole at the best of times."

"I should like to," I evaded, "but I've an appointment early to-morrow with the man about the book. But I'll put in a couple of days on my way back next week. Where are you staying?"

"At the Continental."

"All right; I'll see you on Tuesday."

We were walking towards the train, when a woman touched my arm. I turned, and found myself face to face with Miriam Lemaire. She was resplendent in a dazzling gown and millinery to match.

"You don't mean to say that you have come to Ostend, Mr. North! 'How are the mighty fallen!'"

"I'm merely passing through," I said.

She looked quite disappointed.

"And I was hoping I was going to get someone to amuse me. How horrid of you!"

"Vauxmaur will amuse you," I said, indicating my dejected Duke, who was eyeing us from a few paces off.

"I don't know him. Who is he?"

"Vauxmaur. But surely you——"

"Introduce him," she said, very quickly.

I did so, and both of them saw me off in my train.

"Don't forget your promise to look me up on your way back," cried Vauxmaur.

"I shan't forget," I called back, but I certainly meant to. Vauxmaur did not interest me at that moment.

As I looked out of the window back at the disappearing platform, I saw them turn and walk off together, laughing and chatting. I was rather sorry, for Vauxmaur's sake, that they had met.

I was back again at Ostend on the Friday. I

had almost forgotten about Vauxmaur, but I was looking forward to meeting Miriam Lemaire. I am not a connoisseur in femininity, but when I saw Meriam Lemaire in the Cercle that evening after dinner, I frankly confess that I never saw a more gloriously lovely creature in my life.

I was not at all surprised to find her with Vauxmaur, nor was I at all surprised to find Vauxmaur in a much more cheerful mood. I thought he must have won a little at baccarat. Later on I came to the conclusion that he must have won a great deal. He invited me to join him and Mrs. Lemaire at supper. I observed that he was particularly lavish with his tips. I began to see light, and grew suspicious.

When we were having a last cigar in the hotel, after Miriam Lemaire had left us, his conversation betrayed his old prodigality. He spoke of giving a grouse party at the Castle in Inverness; he spoke glibly of renting partridge shooting in Norfolk; he spoke of thousands as an ordinary mortal would speak of hundreds.

I listened for some time without saying anything. I was thinking of the change wrought in three days.

"I take it," I said at last, tentatively, "that you've been winning some money."

He smiled with vacuous satisfaction.

"Not a centime," he said. "I'm fiendishly unlucky at the tables, or at anything else."

"But, my dear Vauxmaur, you were on the verge of bankruptcy Tuesday, and to-day you are inviting me to shoot with you, hunt with you, yacht with you!"

"My dear North, I've had a stroke of luck."

"Obviously."

"In short, I've—but, hang me, why should I tell you?"

"Why, indeed, since I know."

"What do you mean?" he asked quickly.

"Miriam Lemaire," I said. "Vauxmaur, take my advice, and be careful—very careful."

"It's purely business," he said evasively.

"Quite so; and that's just why I tell you to be careful."

The next morning I rose very early and found Miriam Lemaire writing letters in the salon.

"Take me out for a constitutional, Mr. North," she said. "It's such a relief to get someone to really amuse one, someone interesting."

"Thanks. I'm glad I fill those requirements. I thought from what I saw last night that Vauxmaur had eclipsed me for the moment."

"Vauxmaur? Pshaw! he's an idiot."

"I understand you are helping him out of his difficulties."

She gave me a swift look of interrogation.

"He has told you then?"

"Not exactly. He has merely implied."

"Well, it only shows, Mr. North, that, unwittingly, as always, perhaps, you have been able again to do me a great service. I wonder when I shall ever be able to repay you?"

"I wonder whether Vauxmaur will ever be able to repay you?" I said grimly. "He's in deep water."

"I shan't expect him to repay me. But—" She stopped short and looked at me keenly. "Then he has n't told you?"

"What?"

"That I'm going to marry him."

"Good Heavens!" I gasped. "Marry Vauxmaur! *You!* You marry a puppy like that!"

Miriam Lemaire laughed.

"My dear Mr. North, it's purely a matter of business. I have persuaded myself that the

Duchess of Vauxmaur will have a better chance than plain Mrs. Lemaire. I have long thought so. In fact, to be quite frank with you, I have gone so far as to work several theories out."

"But, my dear Mrs. Lemaire!" I exclaimed, "think of poor Vauxmaur. Why, surely you could have taken your choice. I know a dozen peers who would jump at you."

"You flatter me, Mr. North; but you are forgetting that there are very few peers that I would jump at. Vauxmaur happens to fit in with my theory very nicely. Fate, in the form and semblance of George North, has precipitated matters. Vauxmaur has no money. Consequently, I shall be first. Money must always be first. He who pays the piper calls the tune. I shall call whatever tune I choose, because I shall pay for it. We are to be married very quietly in London next week. I am looking to you to come and give me away." She broke off in a careless laugh.

"But, my dear creature, you appal me. Life with Vaux——"

"We have an understanding. He will go his way—I mine. I shall keep him in moderate luxury and—well, perhaps he'll die early. I

believe he's got consumption and a shaky heart. I've made exhaustive inquiries. Anyhow, Miriam Lemaire has played her part. The part of the Duchess of Vauxmaur comes next. You don't feel sorry for Hugh, do you?"

"Hugh? Vauxmaur? Um—well, not much. He deserves anything he gets. If he likes to sell his name, let him. But you?" I could say no more. The whole thing staggered me. And, curiously enough, just then Vauxmaur's words on the Ostend boat came back to me.

"Marriage is quite impossible," he had said. I remembered his look, the sudden change in his voice. Did Vauxmaur love someone? Did some unknown girl love him? I wondered whether a woman's heart would break, and whether it mattered much to either of these two if it did. I was in a cynical mood, and I am afraid I realized for the first time that Miriam Lemaire, with her lovely eyes and voice, with her irresistible, almost mesmeric charm, had a hold on my life. I had begun to take a sort of proprietary interest in her. And now she was going to marry a cub like Vauxmaur!

Well, it would serve them both right when the inevitable happened.

At *déjeuner* that day Vauxmaur received a telegram. We were lunching à *deux* at a window table. Mrs. Lemaire had left us to lunch with King Leopold at the Château.

I watched Vauxmaur's face as he read the telegram, and I saw that its perusal moved him deeply.

"Ripping," he muttered. "She's a brick! I knew she would." Then he laid the telegram on the table and drank copiously. Quite by accident I caught a glimpse of the telegram. It ran as follows and its meaning was unintelligible to me:

"I agree; but I must see you first. Meet me at Verrey's 11:30 to-morrow evening. Wire.

"LILLIE."

Vauxmaur and I both crossed by the day boat the next day. The wedding had been fixed for the middle of the next week at the Registrar's office in St. James's. I had promised to be present. Mrs. Lemaire was to remain at Ostend a few days.

I parted from Vauxmaur at Charing Cross. I thought he looked excited and embarrassed when a little yellow-haired, blue-eyed girl, dressed

most daringly, came forward and greeted him.

"Hello, Lillie," he said. "I did n't expect you here."

"Lillie," I thought, and remembered the telegram. Verrey's at half-past eleven. Lillie—who was Lillie? The girl whose heart was going to be broken? She was not very pretty, but her face was strong and determined, and her eyes were full of expression. I felt more convinced than ever that Vauxmaur was a scoundrel.

Now I admit that it was nothing to me, and that my interference was questionable, to say the least; but that evening I found myself strolling into Verrey's after the theatre. It was as I expected. Vauxmaur was there, and he was talking excitedly to "Lillie" in a corner, and I saw that the girl had tears in her eyes. Vauxmaur did not notice me; and I joined a friend at a table remote from them.

They left together five minutes afterwards. Neither had noticed me.

I felt that I should like to have comforted the girl, congratulated her on a lucky escape, kicked Vauxmaur, and spoken a few forcible words to Miriam Lemaire. I did none of these

things, and forgot all about the unknown Lillie of the yellow hair before the wedding day.

His Grace the Duke of Vauxmaur was duly and legally married to Mrs. Miriam Lemaire by special license by the Registrar. I was one of the witnesses. A friend of Miriam Lemaire—a Mrs. Franks—was the other.

After the ceremony, the four of us drove to the Carlton and had lunch.

And now a most curious and unexpected thing occurred. Vauxmaur was suddenly taken with a violent 'paroxysm of coughing. I thought the man would choke. A fish-bone must have been the cause. Vauxmaur did not choke, but—he broke a blood-vessel.

They took him to one of the rooms, and doctors were summoned. He was very ill, and that night, before dinner was over, he died.

I was present. When the end had come, Miriam said to me:

“I knew he could not live long, but I never dreamed it would come so soon.” And then suddenly: “Mr. North, I am Miriam, Duchess of Vauxmaur.”

I was stunned by the grotesqueness of it all. She seemed entirely free from any sentimental

regrets, and was calmly despatching messages about mourning. Already in the streets the paper-boys were calling out the news of the marriage and death of the Duke.

I was taking my leave of the new Duchess in a private salon she had taken at the hotel, when a servant entered. He looked troubled.

"There's a lady to see your Grace," said the man.

"I can't see anyone, at this time," said the Duchess. "You must surely understand that."

"I have told the lady so," was the reply, "but she insists."

"What is her name?"

"That is the most extraordinary part of it, your Grace." The man was obviously most embarrassed. "She—she says her name is—is the Duchess of Vauxmaur."

"What nonsense! The woman must be mad!"

Miriam went a little pale. "What is she like?"

"Well, your Grace, she's—I hardly know how to explain it; but, well, the fact of the matter is, your Grace, that—that we know her here. Pray, pardon me, your Grace, but the poor Duke has often dined here with—with the lady."

I looked from the servant to Miriam in blank amazement.

"Show the person up," said Miriam coldly. "Mr. North, will you oblige me by waiting? This ought to be interesting."

A minute afterwards a girl dashed into the room. She was white as death, and her eyes gleamed.

I caught my breath, for I saw that the girl was Lillie—Lillie of the yellow hair.

"Where is Hugh?" she panted. "Oh! it can't be true! It is a lie. He is not dead. And you? Who are you? Are you the woman he married?"

"I don't understand you, madam," said Miriam coldly. "Who are you?"

"I? I am his wife," she said.

"*You—his—wife?*"

"Yes—yes! Oh, I knew you would never believe me, so I brought this with me. See—the certificate. We were married two months ago, and I promised to keep it a secret. I have been very wicked, but——"

Miriam Lemaire snatched the marriage certificate from the girl's hand, glanced at it, then crushed it in her hand.

"Good God!" she said. "Is it true?"

"Of course it is true. My name was Lillie Vallency. I'm still on the stage. I'm at the Gaiety. And I—I—have something else to tell you. I must tell you now. I—I knew he was going to marry you. I let him do it. He told me he must have money, and that you—you would pay all his debts and——"

"Good Heavens, girl," I exclaimed, "what are you talking about? You mean to say that you conspired to allow your husband to commit bigamy?"

"Oh, I did it for his sake. It would only be for a little while, and it would save him. She was rich—and—and it would n't be bigamy at all." She flashed a look of defiance at Miriam Lemaire, who stood rigid as a statue, pale as death, but with a wicked gleam in her eyes. "I am a wicked woman, I know, but I loved him. I never thought of her. I never tempted him like she did. I am his wife. She never was his wife. She never could have been his wife!"

Miriam Lemaire darted forward like a tigress.

"You little kitchen cat, what do you mean?" she hissed.

"Mean? Why, I mean that you have a hus-

band living. Hugh knew it all the time. So did I, but——”

If Miriam Lemaire did not faint, she certainly gave a very startling imitation.

VII

THE INCIDENT OF THE GREAT DETECTIVE

It was about six o'clock.

I was sitting in my study, smoking and trying to decide whether I should go to the theatre, to the club, or to dinner with a somewhat tedious aunt at Kensington. I had a stall at the Lyceum, a conditional appointment with Foulkes at the club, and a standing and long-neglected invitation to dine with Aunt Octavia. So it was something of a problem.

Fate decided it for me; and, as it turned out, I neither went to the theatre, the club, nor to my respected female relative's. When I say Fate decided, I use the word in a twofold sense, as will shortly be seen.

"A gentleman to see you, sir, upon a private matter," said my man, intruding upon the problem with a card.

I glanced at the bit of pasteboard and read:
"Mr. John Fate."

“Who is the man?” I asked, witlessly enough.

“I have n’t the remotest idea, sir,” replied my amiable clown. “He looks like a—well, a groom, or mabbe a barrister.”

“Mr. John Fate?” I mused. “Now, who the dickens is Mr. John Fate? I have some sort of a notion that I’ve heard that name before. Show the fellow in.”

A minute afterwards a tall, spare man, with loosely knit limbs, a clean-shaven, keen face, dark, closely cropped hair, and pale blue eyes deeply set beneath beetling brows, entered the room lazily, and stared around him with the air of a man who had grown tired of life, and was seeking a new interest without the hope of ever finding one. He was a man slightly over the medium height, and his age, I should say, was about five-and-thirty. He hardly looked like a groom—the barrister guess fitted better. He was dressed in a loose-fitting, blue walking-suit, and he wore a low collar with a black tie. He carried a hard, black felt hat in his hand, a pair of gloves, and a silver-mounted partridge cane.

I mention these seemingly unimportant details because they afterwards had a significance,

and, as it happened, I remembered them. He was a man you took in at a glance, noting everything from the color of his hair to the shape of his boots—a man whose face, once seen, you never forgot.

After coolly surveying my room, Mr. John Fate graciously deigned to look at me. I had risen, and was waiting his pleasure.

“How do you do?” he said in a pleasant, rather oratund voice. “Mr. North, I believe?”

“Yes. You wish to see me, Mr. Fate?”

“I do. Can you spare a moment?”

“Sit down,” I said. I was beginning to feel a little nettled, for his manner seemed to betoken something like contempt. He appeared to be listening, and looking the while at the closed door through which he had just entered.

Suddenly he raised a long forefinger to his lips.

“Excuse me a moment, Mr. North,” he whispered.

I looked at him blankly, for he was creeping as lightly as a cat across the room towards the door, which he suddenly opened. To my surprise, I saw my amiable fool of a valet blunder into the room, mutter an incoherent apology, and beat a precipitous retreat.

"I have a natural distaste for eavesdroppers," said Mr. Fate, shutting the door. "And I particularly wish to avoid them in my conversation with you."

"I did not suspect the scoundrel," I gasped.

"You were probably not listening. I was. It is my nature to listen. However, he won't bother us now. May I be seated? And have you any objection to my smoking? I can never talk to a man who is smoking without doing so myself."

"Pray forgive me," I murmured weakly. "Do me the honor to try my cigars."

"Thanks, I prefer my own cigarettes—Algerian. I never smoke anything else."

Mr. Fate had already taken a chair on the other side of my fireplace, and was lighting his cigarette. I looked at him in bewilderment. Never in my life had I met a man with more extraordinary manners. I was too interested to be indignant; and when, after a long pause, he looked up and said, with a tired smile: "You are puzzled, Mr. North; you are somewhat puzzled—eh?" I could only exclaim: "Surprised, my dear sir, is not the word. What, in the name of common sense, do you want?"

"We shall come to it in time, Mr. North," he replied, with irritating suavity. "But, as a preliminary, I may mention that it is a matter of very great importance—indeed, I cannot exaggerate its importance. Needless to say, I should not have troubled you had it been otherwise."

"But who the devil are you?"

"I?" For the first time Mr. Fate exhibited a mild surprise, not unmingled with protest. "You don't know me, then?"

"I have n't a ghost of an idea who you are," I retorted bluntly; for I was beginning to resent his impudence—it was nothing less.

"I sent in my card. I took care to—to come to you openly and without disguise."

"But, confound it all," I exclaimed testily, "I don't know who John Fate is. It's only a name to me—nothing more."

The stranger regarded me for a few seconds with amused pity. Then he said:

"You are, perhaps, fortunate, Mr. North. I am John Fate, the detective."

"Indeed!" I remarked, perhaps a little ironically. "I am pleased to meet you—which is a polite fiction. And now, perhaps, Mr. John

Fate, you will favor me with your business?
My time——”

“A thousand pardons. I shall be brief. I have come to you to ask for some information which I feel sure you can give me, if you will. You are well acquainted with a certain lady who is known as Mrs. Lemaire.”

I felt a sudden tightening of the skin of my face.

“Mrs. Lemaire? What of her?” I asked.

“A great deal, Mr. North, if I may claim your indulgence for a brief time. May I ask you to be so good as to tell me just what you remember of the circumstances relating to the marriage—the pseudo-marriage—of Mrs. Lemaire and the deceased Duke of Vauxmaur?”

“In the first place I must ask you to let me know what use you mean to make of any information I may give you,” I retorted.

“I shall merely utilize it for the purpose of knotting together the few remaining threads of the net I have woven around that most interesting and brilliant lady.”

“You are under instructions from——”

“No one, in particular. I have been observing Mrs. Lemaire for a very long time—

ever since I was consulted by a gentleman who considers her to be the murderess of his son."

"Mrs. Lemaire is a friend of mine," I said coldly.

Mr. Fate smiled benignly.

"I cannot think, Mr. North, that you really mean that. The woman is one of the most dangerous criminals of the century."

"I'm afraid," I said rising, "it is not within my province to assist in convicting dangerous criminals. I wish you good-night."

Mr. Fate did not rise. He drew a long breath at his cigarette and frowned.

"Mr. North," he said, "I may as well tell you that nothing you can say or do can make the slightest difference one way or another. Miriam Lemaire is a doomed woman. We have practically completed a damning chain of evidence against her. Ah! she is a clever creature. Gad, I can't help admiring her!" Mr. Fate's eyes lit up with the first real expression I had observed. "But she made a slip—just one little, foolish slip—and it gave us our opening."

"And that slip?"

"Ah! If we are to be frank, well and good. If you are prepared to help me, I'll satisfy your

curiosity. I have not troubled you before, because it is my practice, as far as possible, to build up a case on the evidence of disinterested witnesses. You, Mr. North, are apparently a friend of this lady's. You dine at her house; you have been seen at the opera with her; you have been seen abroad in her company; you were even observed on one occasion— But what does it matter? Mr. North, you know me; or if you don't you ought to. I am not a man who runs his head against a brick wall. I think my record will show you that I have made very few mistakes. For the past few months I have devoted myself to Miriam Le-maire. I intend to rid society of a pest, a plague spot. I am in a position to do so."

"Then why do you come to me?" I asked angrily, for the idea of giving evidence against a friend, whoever and whatever that friend might be, was naturally abhorrent to me. Quite apart from that, I had grown to take almost a proprietary interest in this very extraordinary woman. I wanted to observe her alone and apart, and I resented any outside interference with my self-imposed *rôle* of chief looker-on at the extraordinary game she played in life.

"You, my dear sir, can materially assist me by giving me, if you will be so good, a brief account of your acquaintanceship with Miriam Lemaire, more particularly that part of it relating to the affairs of the deceased Duke of Vauxmaur, whom, I understand, you introduced to Mrs. Lemaire at Ostend, and at whose marriage with Mrs. Lemaire you were present, as well as at his Grace's untimely death."

"I refuse—absolutely," I said hotly. "I have nothing to do with your affairs. You must ferret out your evidence elsewhere, as best you can!"

Mr. Fate rose.

"I quite understand your attitude," he said. His gaze wandered round the room, and he smiled leniently. "Indeed, Mr. North, I may as well tell you that I have gained all the really important information I require."

"What do you mean?" I asked, not a little puzzled. I was beginning to suspect vaguely that I had in some way let Mr. Fate get the better of me.

"If you are interested," said the detective, walking towards the door, "let me suggest that you go round to Marlborough Street Police Court to-morrow morning."

“You mean that you——”

“No, you won’t see me, but I fancy you’ll see Mrs. Lemaire. Good-night, Mr. North, and many thanks. I am sorry to have troubled you, but you have rendered me a great service. Don’t trouble your man; I can let myself out. And, by the way, take my advice and tell him not to listen at keyholes in future. Good-night!”

The next moment I was alone—alone and uncomfortable. Was Miriam Lemaire to be prosecuted? If so, what for? And why had the detective come to me now, when apparently everything had been done?

And the man’s last words about my having rendered him a service! What had I said or done?

My front door banged. I looked out of the window. Fate was hailing a hansom that had been waiting on the opposite side of the street. I watched it drive off eastward, and turned just as my man entered the room. He looked excited.

“Moss,” said I, “why were you listening at that door just now?”

“If you please, sir, I will explain later, but—but——”

"Well, out with it, man. What's the matter?"

He came a step nearer.

"If you please, sir, Mrs. Lemaire is here."

"Here? Where?"

"In my room, sir."

"In *your* room?"

"Yes, sir; she came immediately after that gentleman did, and——"

I did not wait to hear more. I was striding down the hall to my servant's room.

True enough, Miriam Lemaire was standing by the fireplace in Moss's room. She was wearing a long travelling coat and a thick veil.

"Good Heavens, what does this mean?" I demanded unceremoniously.

"Hush!" she whispered. "Has he gone?"

"Fate?"

She nodded. So did I. She continued:

"I followed him here. I knew he would come, and, if I am not mistaken, he'll be back again very soon. But I'll explain in a few words. May I come into your study?"

I led the way silently. Moss was hovering in the hall.

"Don't admit anybody," I cautioned. "I am not at home. Understand?"

Once inside my room, Miriam Lemaire promptly switched off the electric light and sat down by the fire in the 'chair just vacated by the detective.

"Mr. North," she said, "I'm in trouble. It is perhaps a matter of life or death. And I've come to you for help. I can trust you. And—but did you tell him anything?"

"Nothing," I said.

"He came here expecting to find me. That's all he came for. But I think I've outwitted him. They have a warrant out for my arrest. He has been working on the case for over a year. But I'm not caught yet. Mr. North, will you help me? You've been very good to me, and once you said that I might come to you in time of need. I must get away from England at once—to-night!"

"But, my dear woman, what are they trying to arrest you for?"

"Don't let's talk of that," she interrupted coolly. "I've kept on the right side of the law as a rule, but I made a slip—a little slip. I've always felt that a crisis must come. It has come. Fate came around to my house just now. I knew what he had come for—I ex-

pected him. I meant to throw him off the track. I told my maid that I had gone to call on you. Fate came. I was in a hansom waiting two doors off. He drove up to my door. I saw him go into my house and come out, heard him give your address to the cabman, saw him drive off, followed him, made friends with your man, and—well, here I am. I heard through the speaking-tube most of what transpired. Fate has gone back to my house in Park Street, firmly convinced that I am not here, but there. He's one of those men who take nothing for granted, and consequently occasionally make slips. But he's a clever man, for all that. Mr. North, will you help me?"

"Tell me what you want me to do."

"Listen. I must get across to the Continent to-night. All the boat trains and boats will be watched. Fate has arranged all that. Consequently, travelling openly is out of the question."

"You suggest a disguise?"

She laughed a short little laugh of scornful amusement.

"Disguises are all very well in story books. No; with your help I think I can manage. It

will be risky, but it's my only chance. Once on the other side, I can laugh at them, and I'll be back in England again soon. Oh, I'm not going to be forced to pose as a hunted exile."

"I should certainly very much like to know with what they are charging you," I said, more and more mystified. "Is it—is it anything to do with the girl Vallency—I mean the Duchess of Vauxmaur?"

"It's just as well that you know nothing," she said. "So be a good fellow and ask no questions. I'll tell you everything as soon as my foot is on French soil."

"Then it must be France?"

"Yes. My plan won't work *via* Holland or Ostend. It must be one route. Now, please go and change your clothes, and come with me at once. I'll promise you a good time, even if we fail. But make haste. I'll wait here. In all probability Fate will be back in another quarter of an hour. By the way, have you a revolver handy?"

I nodded.

"Bring it, and see that it is loaded," she said.

Now, I am something of a fool in many respects, and I suppose that the average man,

fool or otherwise, would, politely or otherwise, have refused to have anything to do with this very interesting little adventure. But, although I do not wish to justify my action, which in the light of subsequent events proved to be extremely unwise, Miriam Lemaire exerted a sort of mesmeric fascination over me. It was a direct result of a master will. I do not say I was in love with her, although she was the most beautiful woman I have ever seen, and the most charming; yet, now, as I look back upon that time, I verily believe that I would have gone through fire and water for her sake. I make this confession. It is needful, and it explains why I changed into a travelling suit and ulster, crammed a few things into my dressing-case, a Colt's into my pocket, and returned to Miriam Lemaire.

"I have seen your man and given him his instructions," she said. "If anyone comes, he is to say that you have gone out and will be back late to-night, and, of course, if the question is asked, that I have never been here. He is a rather foolish oaf, but I've given him a substantial present. Come along, but leave that dressing-case. We must have no luggage."

“Shall we take a cab?”

“Certainly not. They are probably watching the door. I will go first. I shall walk to the corner and get in the ’bus, ride as far as Piccadilly Circus, then take another to Waterloo. You go straight to Waterloo—in a cab if you like—take a ticket to Basingstoke, get in a first smoker on the eight-five. I will join you. Don’t speak to me after you are on the train unless we are alone.”

“But why Basingstoke?” I asked.

“Because they will never dream of my going there. They will look for me only on the Continental trains.”

“But you are sure you won’t be stopped?” I was beginning to enter into the spirit of the thing.

“It is n’t likely. They won’t look for me in an omnibus. Fate knows very well that I am in London, and that I shall try to cross the Channel to-night. He had a pretty shrewd suspicion, based upon my visit to you, that you will help me. He came here not for information—that was a blind—but merely to find me. Your attitude, dear Mr. North, completely disarmed him. You see, you might have behaved

very differently if you had known I was in Moss's room."

"But how does going to Basingstoke help you?"

"The boat train for Havre leaves Southampton at midnight. The boat train leaves Waterloo at nine-forty. They'll watch that train at Waterloo. They will probably take no notice of the eight-five local. As it happens, I have obtained, through Cook's, two tourist tickets in the name of Mr. and Mrs. Thomas, for Paris, *via* Southampton and Havre. We shall take those up at Southampton."

"Then you relied on my joining you?"

She smiled with conscious power. "Yes," she said. "I knew you would."

"But how about getting on to the boat?" I asked.

I could not help admiring her perfect *sang-froid*. I was conscious of feeling infinitely more excited than she appeared.

"That is where the risk comes; but I think we can manage it. I have sent some luggage to await Mr. Thomas at Southampton. I shall claim it there—or you shall—and book it through to Paris. We shall not get out at Basingstoke,

for I have already bought tickets from there to Southampton, which we shall give up. We arrive at ten-thirty-seven. The boat train, which will be searched at Waterloo on its departure and at the docks on arrival, does not get into Southampton until just before midnight. We shall be on board the boat long before that. But we must not waste time. At Waterloo at eight-five."

I let Miriam Lemaire out, and from my window saw her walk swiftly down the street.

Ten minutes afterwards I confirmed the instructions she had given to Moss, ostentatiously whistled up a hansom, and told the man to drive me to my club.

I felt rather proud of myself for the precaution, particularly as I noticed a suspicious-looking man standing on the kerb within ear-shot.

I dismissed the cab at the club, went in, looked at the clock, and had a brandy and soda. Then I came out. The same cabby who had brought me solicited me for another fare. The incident caused me misgivings, and I walked some distance before I hailed another, and told him in a whisper to drive me to Waterloo. I don't

know whether it was fancy acting on somewhat excited nerves or not, but I experienced the feeling of being followed. The feeling prompted me to lift the pad from one of the little windows at the back of the cab and look out.

A hansom was close behind, and in the flare of an electric light I recognized the driver as the man who had driven me to my club. His cab was empty.

I was growing nervous and wondering whether I ought to give my new cabby a new direction. My perturbation was acutely increased by an incident which occurred in Pall Mall. A man on the pavement hailed my pursuer. He drove on unheeding. He was following me; I knew it now.

I must act quickly. I pushed up the cover of the aperture in the cab roof.

"Did I tell you Waterloo?" I shouted.

"Yes, sir."

"What an idiot! I meant Charing Cross."

"Right y' are, sir."

When I alighted outside the station, I observed my mysterious cabman coming through the gates. But now he had a fare.

I did not lose a second. Diving into the crowd,

I went into the station, and out of it on the left into Villiers Street. I had only ten minutes to spare. I walked swiftly across the Hungerford footbridge, reached Waterloo at two minutes past eight, bought a first return to Basingstoke—I thought the buying of a return ticket a stroke of genius—and walked along beside the train, peering into every carriage and trying to appear quite undisturbed.

At length I saw Miriam Lemaire. She was in the last first-class carriage, alone; it was a smoking-compartment. I stepped in carelessly, got my ticket clipped and sat down.

The collector slammed the door; we were off. I glanced at her. She was thickly veiled, and sat facing the engine in the far corner of the carriage. I made no sign of recognition, nor did she.

The train had begun to move, when the door was suddenly flung open.

“Come on, sir! Here you are! Just in time,” shouted a railway guard. “In you get!”

As he spoke, a man blundered into the carriage and begged my pardon. He wore a long tweed ulster and a black bowler hat.

I glanced at him carelessly, and inwardly

cursed him for choosing this of all other carriages in a measurably long train. Then I nearly cried out with surprise, for the man was John Fate, the detective.

Mr. Fate did not show himself in his true character. He glanced at the veiled figure in the corner, nodded affably to me, and gave the ticket inspector, who was riding on the step of the moving train, half-a-crown.

We had glided out of Waterloo, and over the Westminster Bridge Road, before I had sufficiently recovered presence of mind to acknowledge his salutation.

"How curious," said Mr. Fate, "that we should meet again so soon, Mr. North. Quite a remarkable coincidence. Are you going far?"

I gave a swift sidelong glance at the woman. She was reading, apparently quite unconcernedly, one of several illustrated periodicals on her lap. Not by the slightest movement did she show any embarrassment. Fortunately, I remembered her instructions that, unless we were alone, I was not to recognize her.

The situation was difficult, and for the first time I wished myself well out of it. Miriam Lemaire might be clever, but this seemed to

prove that John Fate was cleverer. It was no accident. He had followed me—that was obvious. I remembered the pursuing cab. I remembered many things, and came to the conclusion that we were being prettily fooled. But Fate was waiting for me to reply to his tentative question. He took a cigarette from a manila case and lit it meditatively. I remembered that those Algerian cigarettes he smoked had a most offensive smell.

“Going far?” I repeated when the pause had grown long and silence strained. “Well, no—that is, to—to Basingstoke.” I said it with as good an affectation of nonchalance as I could muster at the moment.

“Basingtsoke—eh?” said Fate, and a shadowy smile flitted across his pallid face. “Ah, I see. Fine country round Basingstoke. Very fond of North Hampshire; was near there quite recently—at Mortimer. You know Mortimer, I suppose?”

I nodded vaguely, and tried to imagine that my teeth were not chattering, and that I did not feel extremely uncomfortable.

“I went over to the old British city of Silchester—very curious, fascinating old place,”

continued Fate, settling himself comfortably in his corner and puffing away at the evil-smelling cigarette. He evidently meant to open a friendly and conventional conversation. The situation was intolerable. I confess that I did not feel equal to it. Why did not the wretched man come to the point and have it over?

I tried to read his face. Was he laughing at me? Certainly, nothing in his demeanor, his words, or his look betrayed anything of the sort. I was puzzled and not all at sure that, after all, I had not the advantage. For he had hardly glanced at Mrs. Lemaire. A thought struck me. Good Heavens! was it possible that he did not know who she was? I caught my breath at the hope, and it gave me some badly needed courage. I lit a cigar and assumed an attitude of comfortable ease.

"Yes," I said, taking up the disjointed conversation, "British-Roman remains are singularly fascinating. You are something of an archæologist, I presume?"

"I am beginning to think I am, Mr. North," he said, with a meaning and singularly unpleasant laugh that made me uncross my legs, and sit up suddenly. "Archæology? Egad,

Mr. North, your little dodge is almost prehistoric; it must have been practised in the Neocene age. Yes, I fancy an archæologist would have a better chance here than a modest latter-day detective."

"I quite fail to understand you," I said vaguely, and wondered, as I spoke, whether I looked as if I meant it.

"Oh, come, come, Mr. North; I don't think you quite fail to understand me."

I gave another swift sidelong glance at Miriam Lemaire; she was calmly looking out of the window. I made a bold bid.

"Look here, my good man," I said, "let us understand each other. What in the name of thunder are you talking about?"

"Sit still, Mr. North, and I'll tell you a little story—shall I?—to kill time between here and Southamp—er, Basingstoke—eh?" He lit another of the Algerian cigarettes and passed me the flaming match, for my cigar had gone out. "You see, Mr. North, it's like this. I am by nature an observant man. I have to be; it's my trade. And"—he laughed shortly—"really, one would have to be singularly short-sighted if one did not see, as I saw early this

evening, when I called at Mrs. Lemaire's house in Park Street, a hansom cab waiting by the kerb three or four doors away."

I moved uneasily and tried to look at the woman in the corner. She was turning over the pages of the *Queen*. Her face was averted.

"Now," continued Mr. Fate, "a hansom cab may stand in one place for nearly an hour if the cab is on a rank, or the cabman drunk; but I take it that a cab does n't remain stationary for nearly an hour with a fare inside."

He regarded me through half-closed eyes. I felt myself going hot and cold with every alternate word. Mr. Fate was enjoying himself. With all his reserve he could not conceal his satisfaction.

"Go on," I said, a little huskily. "I am trying to see the connection between the cab incident and your present behavior."

"Just so," he retorted, with a silent chuckle. "It's this way. The fare in that cab happened to be a lady I recognized—in fact, the lady I was trying to call upon. Oh, I see you start. You have perhaps heard the story before? No? Very well, then. Besides being observant, I flatter myself that I have a modicum of common

sense; that is to say, I can put two and two together without making it five. A lady who sits for an hour in a cab, practically just outside her own house, I argued, is either mad or—or is watching that house. Good. I happen to know Mrs. Lemaire is anything but insane, and also that it was quite possible that she, with her many agents and means of gaining information, expected me. *Ergo*, she means to follow me. That is wise, though prehistoric." Mr. Fate lit another cigarette.

"The servant at Mrs. Lemaire's was blandly ingenuous. 'Mrs. Lemaire,' said he, 'is out.' 'Where?' I asked. He would inquire. He did inquire, and returned. 'She has gone to call on Mr. North,' said he." Mr. Fate smiled with undisguised amusement. "Now, as a general rule, Mr. North, a well-ordered servant does n't give such accurate information as to his mistress's whereabouts. It was crude. Said I to myself: 'That's according to instructions. She's not gone anywhere near Mr. North.' I went outside," continued Mr. Fate, "and observed Lemaire in her cab. 'Good,' said I to myself. 'My first impression was right. She means to follow me!' In an audible voice

I gave my man your address. And afterwards I observed that the waiting cab was following me. It was rather amusing."

"But why did you not arrest her there and then?" I exclaimed.

"Because I was not in a position to do so. It was better to wait. When you have a net that is not quite sound, it is better to mend it before drawing it in. I was mending the net. You, my dear Mr. North, could strengthen a few meshes, if you would. What I wanted, and still want, is a little *tête-à-tête* with Miriam Lemaire before—well, before I am robbed of that privilege for some time. But to continue. You know what happened at your rooms? Of course you do. And don't you suppose that I do, too? I'll tell you. Your man gave me a clue. He knew what you didn't, which was that Miriam Lemaire was there, as well as I."

"How the deuce did you know?" I asked eagerly.

"Aha! your very question is unwise, Mr. North. If I had not known before, I should know *now*."

I felt that I could have bitten out my tongue. I looked again at the woman in the corner.

She was still reading the *Queen*, apparently quite oblivious of our conversation. I was miserably excited. My forehead was wet with perspiration.

"Still," continued the detective, "you need not fear that you have given your clever friend away. I may as well comfort you by telling you that I heard the wheels of her cab draw up, your door open, and—and the man listening at the door. I admit that I was a little surprised when I opened it. I rather fancied I should find Mrs. Lemaire instead of the man. But that miscalculation was explained when I saw the speaking-tube."

"Well, what did that tell you?" I asked breathlessly.

Mr. Fate shrugged his shoulders.

"That someone was at the other end," he said.

"How?" I had almost forgotten everything in my interest in this extraordinary man's revelations.

"I heard," he said, "the click of the removal of the whistle from the other end. Yours, you remember, was out, hanging by a small chain—naturally one's servant does n't, as a rule,

whistle one up—eh? Oh, my dear Mr. North, pray let us be honest; drop that mask of injured innocence. Come, come; I can read you like a book. Shall I tell you what happened then? I went out—not before I had observed your man's embarrassment—and got into my hansom. The cabman is a friend of mine; a clever fellow, too, by the way. He it was who, a little later, drove you to your club.”

“The devil!” said I. “Do you have spies on every street corner?”

“Not quite,” he grinned. “And those I do have are not always infallible. For instance: my cabman failed to secure you for a fare when you left the club. However, that made no special difference.”

I was beginning to feel the grasp of a dazed, hopeless impotence. It was like being in the wheels of a relentless mill: I could do nothing.

We had stopped at Clapham Junction, but no one got into the carriage, and, what was perhaps more remarkable, no one attempted to get out. The woman in the corner must certainly have heard all that Fate was telling me. Why did she not make a desperate dash for liberty? I verily believe I should have trampled

upon the dignity of British law to the extent of a tussle with Fate, if she had made the attempt. But she made no attempt, and Fate paid no attention to her. Could it be possible that he did not realize that she *was* Miriam Lemaire? My brain was fairly addled.

“As I was saying,” the detective continued, “I got into my hansom and drove off. I saw you watching me from your window. I did not drive far. I gave my man orders to double and return on the opposite side of the road and we won back in time to see someone enter your room and turn off the electric lights.

“I waited, and though, of course, I could not profit by the use of any of the five senses, I fancied I could imagine pretty accurately what was taking place. You see, I was sure she meant to cross the Channel to-night, and she was asking you to help her. When she came out of your door, I observed that the lights went on again, and later I saw you through the window. You had changed from evening dress to a travelling suit. ‘Aha!’ said I, ‘he is going with her.’ ”

Mr. Fate laughed softly and lit another of the atrocious cigarettes. I looked at the veiled

woman. What marvellous self-control she had to sit perfectly still and undisturbed, listening to all this!

"When she left your house I followed her," Fate went on, "leaving you in the hands of my cabman, Jewel. She took an omnibus and rode outside."

I could not restrain a smile. The picture of Miriam Lemaire on the top of an omnibus during the dinner-hour touched my sense of humor.

"Taking the same 'bus, I went inside," pursued Mr. Fate. "She alighted at Piccadilly Circus. So did I. She crossed the Circus and got on a Baker Street and Waterloo 'bus—inside, this time. I climbed up outside, and after a bit offered the conductor a double fare. 'For myself and the lady inside,' I said. 'Which lady?' he asked. 'The one in the long gray ulster,' I explained. 'But she has paid for herself, sir,' he objected. 'You mean the one as wants off at Waterloo Station, sir?' 'Right you are,' I said; and so, you see, I had the information I needed. Thus far, Mr. North, you perceive that any man of ordinary intelligence might have gone. But a detective

must never jump at conclusions; he should keep an open mind. She was going to Waterloo: for the mail train to catch the Southampton boat? Hardly. It was an hour too early. What then? Why, she was going to take the eight-five local—a train which would not be watched. A good move, you'll say; a most excellently shrewd move."

Fate here looked across at the veiled lady. It was the first time that he had appeared to remark her presence. I held my breath, but he only smiled and continued:

"Mrs. Lemaire, being no ordinary blunderer, left the Waterloo omnibus at Charing Cross. This confused me a little, and the next move was still more unlooked-for." Again he glanced across the compartment, as if including our fellow-passenger in the conversation. "A clever move, too, for before I fully realized what was happening, she had hailed a four-wheeler which was crawling down Whitehall. I was almost at her elbow when she gave her order to the driver: 'To Waterloo main line.' The next moment she was rattling away down Whitehall.

"I confess that I did not like to lose sight of her; but there was no cab handy, and the four-

wheeler had disappeared. But I was certain now that she had given a straight order—that she was really going to Waterloo this time. So I strolled towards Charing Cross, meaning to take a train across the bridge to intercept her. I had not gone very far before I saw you in a hansom.”

“You saw me?” I queried.

“Yes; and I was a little surprised to find that Jewel was not driving you. He was close behind, however, and drove me after you into Charing Cross Station, giving me a brief account of your movements in the mean while. A sharp man, is Jewel—a jewel by nature, as well as by name, you might say. But why were you going to Charing Cross Station when Waterloo was your place? There was no time to reason it out: I had to act. I saw you dash into the station and I stopped to asked your cabman a few questions. ‘Gent first of all told me to drive ’m to Waterloo,’ said he; ‘then, when he was in Trafalgar Square, ’e sez, sez ’e, “Charing Cross.”’ That was enough. You had seen Jewel following you, and were suspicious, eh? That was it, was n’t it?”

I cursed this man’s brilliant brain. There were precious few cobwebs in it.

"The rest, my dear sir, you know," he went on. "You did not see me at your elbow when you took the first-class return ticket to Basingstoke. A first return Basingstoke!" He burst out laughing. "It was what a five-year-old boy might have done. And so—well, here we are; this is Woking, I fancy. Yes. Now oblige me, Mr. North, by getting out here and going quietly back to London, unless you wish to be mixed up in a very disagreeable business. And you, madam," he rose and addressed the woman in the corner, "since it seems we are not to have that little preliminary interview I was so anxious to obtain, I must do my duty. You must come with me."

I sprang to my feet and instinctively put myself in front of the woman, who had risen.

The train was slowing up. She was cleverly trapped. I could not help admiring the cool daring of the detective. She might have murdered him, you know.

"Come, come, Mrs. Lemaire; it is time to quit posing," he said. "I know you, and I shall not stand any more nonsense. I hold a warrant for your arrest. Allow me, Mr. North."

He took a forward step. I stood between them with balled fists. I do not know what I meant to do, or was prepared to do. I was desperate, and I realized that Miriam Lemaire was in the last extremity. But suddenly I felt a hand on my arm, and a woman's voice said:

"Pray, gentlemen, what does all this mean?"

I whirled about, gasping. The woman had raised her veil. *She was not Miriam Lemaire!*

I dropped into my seat and stared at her, dumb with amazement and hardly believing the evidence of my own eyes. She was dressed exactly as I had last seen Mrs. Lemaire. She was a woman of about the same height and figure; but her face was plain and rather coarse-featured, and her voice was shrill and a trifle metallic.

"This really is the most extraordinary behavior!" she exclaimed. "What may you want with me, sir?" This to John Fate, in tones of angry expostulation.

If my surprise was complete, that of the detective passed description. I cannot imagine a more complete disconcertment; a more utterly demoralized collapse. He stared blinking, like a cat at the sun, took a half-step forwards, and

then dropped into his seat, wiping the fine perspiration from his forehead.

"Well!" he gasped, "this fairly bowls me over and out! I'm nothing but a club-footed night-watchman, and I'd ought to be back in the uniform, touching my helmet to the man that wants to know where Trafalgar Square is!"

I did not clearly understand anything during those few minutes when we were running into Woking. The only thing I felt sure of was that Miriam Lemaire was safe, and that she had carefully planned and executed this downfall for John Fate.

Meanwhile, the unknown woman, apparently boiling with indignation at the affront put upon her, was all for pulling the communication cord and summoning the train-guard.

"It's monstrous!" she cried shrilly. "The man must be a dangerous lunatic. But you, sir," turning to me, "you are a gentleman, and I'm sure you will protect me."

"We shall be at Woking in a moment," I said, trying to calm her.

"I shall give him in charge," she announced, with growing anger. "You will testify in court for me. I have been insulted!"

She had been drawing closer to me as if for protection, and now I distinctly heard her whisper: "Follow your instructions to the letter—don't forget! You may spoil everything!" Then she broke out again, excitedly and audibly: "If it had n't been for you, sir, coming between us so brave-like, I don't know what might not have happened!" Then she added for Mr. Fate's benefit: "The disgusting brute!"

Fate was watching us morosely. I felt almost sorry for the man. He deserved better success. But now he pulled himself together. "Madam," he said unsteadily, "I apologize most humbly. I am an officer of the law, and I have made a mistake. I mistook you for someone else."

"Nice excuse!" shrilled the unknown woman, rubbing it in as is the wont of her sex; "a very pretty excuse, I must say!"

We had stopped. Fate let down the window, thrust an arm through and opened the door, intent only upon making his escape from the shrill tongue.

"Are you going?" I asked suavely.

He muttered an oath under his breath.

"I've been fooled, Mr. North, and perhaps

it's just as well for you that I know you have been fooled, too."

"Pardon me," I said, "I quite fail to grasp your meaning."

"Are n't you getting out here?" he asked, still like a man in a daze.

"Pardon me, again; I thought I mentioned that I was going as far as Basingstoke."

He regarded me with still greater bewilderment. Evidently the usually cool-headed Mr. Fate was hopelessly muddled.

"We shall meet again, perhaps," I said, quite airily; "under pleasanter auspices, let us hope. And, my dear sir, let me advise you as a friend—don't go about arresting poor, unprotected females who have done nothing. It's dreadfully embarrassing to all concerned."

He frowned and got away as quickly as he could. A moment later I saw him talking with many gesticulations to an inspector of police on the Woking platform. Also, I remarked that the inspector was smiling in amusement. There is little love lost between the members of the regular force and the plain-clothes men.

The train had started on. I had almost forgotten the presence of my singular companion.

I was wondering where Miriam Lemaire could be, and repeating her instructions to me word by word. It was a laugh from the unknown woman which caused me to turn to her. She was carefully gathering her illustrated papers.

“What does it all mean?” I asked, since we were now alone in the compartment. “Who are you, my dear lady, and where is Mrs. Lemaire?”

“If you please, sir, I am Mrs. Lemaire’s maid—Mary.”

“Yes; but what——”

She stopped me with a gesture.

“My instructions were to say nothing, sir. Please don’t ask me.”

“May I not even ask where you are going?”

“I don’t think you need to ask that. I am going to Southampton to catch the Havre boat. I’ve got my luggage behind. Now, if you will excuse me, sir, I’ll just change this coat and veil. Those were my instructions.”

Always that word, “instructions.” Surely Miriam Lemaire had provided carefully for every detail. I saw the woman divest herself of the long travelling ulster and the thick veil. She was now attired in a plain black serge, tailor-made.

"What are you going to do with those things," I asked. "Heave them out of the window?"

"Wait, and you will see," said my companion. "Mrs. Lemaire is behind."

"In this train?"

"Yes, sir."

"Good Heavens!" I ejaculated. "What a risk! Is she—is she disguised?"

"I was to say nothing, sir," said Mary, a bit doggedly, this time.

We had hardly stopped at the station at Basingstoke before Mary had the door of the carriage open. A few seconds afterwards, Miriam Lemaire, wearing a long plaid cape, a straw hat, and a coffee-colored veil, entered the carriage. She took no notice of me, sitting down in the seat opposite Mary, and glancing, rather anxiously, I fancied, at the door, while I sat like a wooden image, listening to the thumping of my heart.

We seemed to stay an interminable time at the busy junction. Every second was weighted with the threat of years. Had John Fate gone back from Woking? Or was he still on the train and liable to put in his appearance at our door? At last, with a grinding of wheels the

train got in motion. When it was clear of the Woking station, Miriam Lemaire slipped off her plaid cape, put it upon the shoulders of Mary, whipped off her coffee-colored veil, and quickly donned the ulster and veil discarded by the maid. The transformation was complete, and almost startling.

"Well," I maundered, "what now?"

Miriam Lemaire's laugh was quite care free and merry.

"I suppose you have had all the excitement in here, have n't you? I'm so glad I was able to fool that bumptious rascal of a Fate. Did Mary play her part nicely, Mr. North?"

"I'm simply befogged," I confessed.

"You poor, dear man! It was a shame not to tell you more, but I was afraid to. I have learned never to trust a man to play a part—especially when the man is a dear, honest soul like you. You mistook Mary for me?"

"By Jove! I did! And so did Fate, right up to the final moment."

"Delicious!" she murmured. "And now see how beautifully it works out. In Mr. Fate's conclusions, the lady in the travelling ulster is *not* Miriam Lemaire. Yet, as a matter of

fact, she really *is*. From this on, Mary is Mrs. Thomas, and you are Mr. Thomas. I am the maid. Here are our tickets, which you must take charge of. We shall be in Southampton in a few minutes, and Mary and I will go straight to the boat while you look after the luggage."

"You are sure there is no danger now?"

"Oh, there may be; but it is hardly worth considering. Fate has discovered that the woman in a thick veil and an ulster is not Miriam Lemaire, or at least she was n't Miriam Lemaire at Woking. I don't think he'll be looking for us at Southampton."

"But please take pity upon my overweening curiosity," I pleaded. "When did you arrange it all?"

"From the first," she replied. "You see, I intended that Fate should follow a decoy, and to that end I had Mary dress as my double. She has about my figure, and she is a sharp girl—are n't you, Mary? When I went in the cab to your rooms, Mary, dressed exactly as I was, followed me, with instructions to follow Fate, and to wait at the end of the street in the shadow of Thompson's doorway until I should come along; when she was to step out of the shadow

and I in. By means of this little ruse, Fate was made to follow Mary, instead of following me. And Mary had instructions to do just what Fate told you she did. Also, you followed your instructions, like a good boy. You have both proved eminently satisfactory and I congratulate you."

"But you? what did you do?"

"Oh, I had it easy. I waited to see Fate take the bait and follow Mary; then I took a cab home, changed, and drove to Waterloo, where I saw you rush into Mary's carriage with Fate at your heels, precisely as I expected and wanted him to. The rest you know. But here we are at Southampton."

There is little more of this remarkable incident to tell. Miriam Lemaire was in Havre the following morning, and I dined with her in Paris the next night.

"I shall never be able to thank you sufficiently, Mr. North," she said, when I was leaving her to catch the mail back for Calais. "You played the part of my second decoy most beautifully, and some day I may try to reward you. You need n't think I shall stay very long in exile. I shall see you in June, at the latest. In the

mean time, I have a fancy for, let us say, Spain and the Velasquez pictures in Madrid. *Au revoir!*”

A week after my return to London I met Mr. John Fate.

“You did me beautifully between you, Mr. North,” he said. “I’m honest enough to admit it.”

“My dear sir,” said I blandly, “will you pardon me if I say that I don’t in the least know what you are talking about?”

VIII

HOW MIRIAM LEMAIRE CAME BACK FROM EXILE

WHEN I had parted from Miriam Lemaire in Paris on that memorable occasion when I had helped her to outwit Mr. John Fate, the famous detective, and to escape to the Continent, she had said to me: "I shall never be able to thank you enough, Mr. North. One day I may try to reward you. I shall not be long in France. This thing will blow over. I shall arrange it."

I knew she meant what she said. There was a ring of sublime confidence, of a complete sense of power, in her voice, when she said: "I shall arrange it."

Although I believed her capable of anything, I wondered how she was going to *écraser* the fact that there was a warrant out for her arrest; that Scotland Yard was hot on her scent and determined to apprehend her.

I knew nothing of the charge, but I had a pretty shrewd idea that it was an ugly one, and

in some way connected with the unfortunate affair of the Duke of Vauxmaur. And, strange to say, although I have taken considerable pains since to ascertain the facts, I do not yet know on what charge she was wanted. I only know that John Fate held a warrant for Miriam Lemaire's arrest and that she became an exile from England and a fugitive from justice.

This was in the winter. June of the following year came and went, and still Miriam Lemaire had not been seen in London.

Where she was I knew not, nor, as far as I could ascertain, did anyone else, including the Criminal Investigation Department. For aught I knew she might still be in Paris; or possibly she had gone to Madrid, as she had suggested she might.

During those few months I had occasion to know that John Fate had never relaxed his vigilance. It was his particular case, and he did not mean to have failure marked against it.

I met him once or twice. He never referred to the subject, but, for all his shrewdness, I knew it was uppermost in his mind, and that he would have sold his soul, if he could have found anybody to buy a commodity of such doubtful

value, to know even as much as I did—which was little enough in all conscience.

Meanwhile, the police annoyed me not a little—not openly, but I discovered that I was watched, and no man, be his walk in life the most exemplary comings and goings of a respectable middle-aged bachelor, who lives, more or less, with his pictures and books, likes the feeling of being constantly shadowed. I was no exception to the rule; and, although I pretended to ignore it for a time, it finally began to get on my nerves, which were usually pretty steady. It was not until I discovered on several occasions that my correspondence was being tampered with and that my servant had been bribed to spy upon me—which, I must add in justice to Moss, he never did—that I decided to go abroad for a time. That was towards the end of October, when I had detected under the outward form and semblance of a servant at Strathboys, where I had been shooting, a fellow who ought to have been wearing a policeman's uniform.

This decided me. I determined to go away and stay with my cousin Denton in Constantinople.

A week afterwards I had arranged everything quite secretly and was actually on the point of leaving by the night boat from Dover to catch the Ostend-Constantinople Express, when I received a letter. The address was in Miriam Lemaire's handwriting, and the envelope bore an Italian stamp, but an indecipherable postmark. As I received it from the hands of the postman at the door of my own chambers, and it had a seal bearing the coronet she always affected, by virtue of the deceased Lemaire's Portuguese title, intact, it was measurably certain that it had not been tampered with.

I opened it and read its contents, which were sufficiently startling.

It was written on the note paper of the European Hotel at Rome, and was dated three days before. It ran as follows:—

My dear Mr. North,—I have ascertained that you are in London, and so write to your London address. You have often said that, were I to ask you to do me a service, you would comply. On one notable occasion I put you to the test, and did not find you wanting. Again I ask you to render me a service and place me under yet

another obligation. Will you, as soon as possible after the receipt of this letter, come to Rome, put up at this hotel, and inquire for the Contessa Giordanelli? I know you are a man to whom a flying visit from one end of Europe to another is what an afternoon call is to an average stay-at-home; and, need I add, my dear Mr. North, that, if it rests with me, you will not be a loser?

It would be useless to give my reasons for the strange request, and unnecessary. I will explain everything when I see you. To allay any alarm on your part, I may add that, although my recent plans have met with several unexpected and, to me, very provoking rebuffs, I am not in danger; and, if it is impossible for you to come to Rome immediately, pray come as soon as you can. There is no immediate hurry; but the sooner you come the more will you please, yours most sincerely,

MIRIAM LEMAIRE.

It was an extraordinary, and for a few moments after reading it I thought a most unwise, letter; for an instant I felt suspicious about its genuineness. Miriam Lemaire was a wise

woman, I argued; and was that the sort of thing she would write, under existing circumstances, running the risk of exposing her hiding-place and the name she had assumed? But the letter, I had noted, was sealed with her cipher; and moreover it was marked "Private"—a wholly unnecessary precaution, for my correspondence is exceptionally light, and I always open all my letters.

But a cab was waiting for me, and Moss was at Victoria with my luggage. It was not a time for lengthy balancing of pros and cons. On my way to the station I thought the affair over, and came to a decision. I would go to Rome, and if, on getting there, I found that I had been duped, I would go on to Constantinople by sea from Naples. No harm would be done.

My experience with the police during the last few months had had the effect of making me suspicious, and I even went so far as to suspect that Mr. John Fate might have written the letter for the express purpose of seeing whether I would go to Rome, and thus give certain proof that I was willing to be a confederate of the woman he was trying to track down. It was an idle thought, as it afterwards proved; I write it

down merely to show the state of my mind at the time.

Accordingly, instead of going to Constantinople *via* Ostend, I went to Rome *via* Calais, Paris, and the Mont Cenis, arriving in the Italian capital on a particularly bright, crisp morning.

I had previously sent a wire to the Contessa Giordanelli, telling her that I was *en route*. Also, I telegraphed from Paris just before starting from the Gare de Lyon.

Going straight from the Rome station to the European Hotel, I changed, and immediately sent up my card to the Contessa Giordanelli.

Five minutes afterwards I was shaking hands with Miriam Lemaire in her private suite of rooms overlooking the Piazza Barberini.

She looked younger and more superbly beautiful than ever; and she seemed really pleased to see me, and grateful for my promptitude in obeying her summons.

"I am tired of being an exile, Mr. North," she said, "and there are several matters which cannot be postponed any longer. I must go back to England."

I agreed with her, saying that England sighed

for her presence; at the same time, I casually referred to the diligence of our mutual friend, Mr. John Fate.

She frowned.

"It is connection with him that I want you to help me," she said.

"Does he know where you are?" I asked.

"No," she answered; "but he knows where you are, also that you have come here to meet me. I told him as much."

"You told him? Why—how?"

"Because I was tired of hiding, and he is such a fool that he would never have found me otherwise. He followed you to Rome; he is here now."

I glanced uneasily around, and she laughed with genuine amusement.

"I made elaborate inquiries," she explained, "and found that the detectives were systematically watching you."

"They were, the scoundrels!" I ejaculated.

"And so," she continued, "I thought they'd very probably follow you, if, before your departure from England to Rome, Fate received anonymous information that you were going to meet Miriam Lemaire—not so?"

"Quite so. Do you want him to arrest you, then?"

"Dear me, no," she said. "I'm going to arrest him instead, with your invaluable assistance."

I stared at her blankly. She puzzled me, and I did not altogether like her burst of mocking laughter. I am not a young man, and I have a somewhat boring reputation to live up to. Her words seemed to offer adventurous possibilities; and I remembered that we were not in steady, conventional, law-abiding England. We were in Italy—in Rome—and the subtle intoxication of Rome was beginning to work in my sluggish blood.

"I've arranged it all," she said. "Your part is simple; but I had to have a man whom I could trust. It took me a long time to work out, because there were so many troublesome little details, and I had to be so absolutely sure that there would be no hitch. I flatter myself that I have engineered a clever plot. I have been unable to put it into execution before, principally because I've been engaged in a very troublesome and delicate transaction connected with certain very highly placed people here."

She dropped her voice. "Like everything else, Mr. North, it is only a question of money. The present situation, as far as I am concerned, is quite simple; much simpler than it was when I left England somewhat hurriedly a few months ago. It is now merely a question between John Fate and me. I mean, that John Fate is the only man on earth who cares a pin about these criminal proceedings. With him it is a question of reputation—career. It is his case, and he has been baffled. He is, in his way, a sublime idiot; but he has an Englishman's dogged, bull-dog stubbornness. He has set out with the determination of getting me into the dock." She laughed unpleasantly, and continued: "I am willing to believe that he won't rest until he has got what he wants." She stopped, and regarded me meditatively for a few seconds.

"Well," said I, "and what is the solution? Incidentally, I may tell you that they've been shadowing me persistently ever since I was the means of helping you out of the country."

"That is Fate, to the crossing of a 't,'" she said. "And the solution is this: Fate must be removed."

I started. I had hardly reckoned on this.

She must have seen the look of alarm that came into my face, for she added quickly:

“Don’t think I mean to kill the poor man, Mr. North. He can be removed in other ways.”

“For instance?”

“Well, he might be bought.”

I shook my head. I had, perhaps, an exaggerated opinion of the integrity of the British police force. She laughed merrily.

“John Fate’s fate’s as good as settled,” she said quietly; “so we need not argue on the possibility. I will tell you what I propose to do, always with your valuable assistance. In the first place, Mr. North, I may say that the man who has deliberately set himself to hound me into the dock of a London police court on a trumpety charge, not so much for the purpose of actually charging me with any very heinous crime as to enable them to ask me inconvenient questions and make awkward and embarrassing suggestions, and so blacken my character and reputation, is John Fate. He is my implacable pursuer. Two or three months ago he had two people behind him. Both of these people,” she added, with a dazzling smile, “have been dealt with. You remember Mr. Phil Harris,

whose son was so foolish as to shoot himself in the Casino Gardens at Monte Carlo because he could not repay me a trifling loan?"

I nodded. It reminded me of a vividly unpleasant incident.

"Well," she said, "he loves money more than he does the memory of a dead son. He has been nearing the bankruptcy court lately—going from bad to worse. I set myself to undermine his investments and to bring about this result."

"But the man was fabulously rich!" I exclaimed.

"He was, but no longer is. He has been borrowing rather wildly, and—of me!"

"Did he know it?"

"Oh, no! It was all done through one of my agents—or several, as a matter of fact. A few weeks ago, however, when he failed to meet some bills, I arranged a conference with him in Paris, told him the truth, offered him his paper for a considerable amount, and a further loan to put him on his legs, in exchange for a written statement withdrawing the charge he brought against me. He succumbed to the temptation. And afterwards asked me to marry him," she added.

I smiled grimly. It was so like Miriam Lemaire.

"But," she went on, there was yet another. You remember the little kitchen cat, the Duchess of Vauxmaur?"

"Naturally," I replied.

"Well, last week she died."

Again I started, for there was a curious sound in her voice, a curious gleam in the lovely eyes. I felt, as I had done before on a certain occasion, that I was in the presence of something particularly unholy.

"I did not see anything about it in the papers," I said.

"No," said Miriam Lemaire; "I fancy they hushed it up. She committed suicide. You'll hear about it later on."

"Do you know anything about it?" I asked bluntly; but she shrugged her sloping shoulders in the manner so characteristic of her, and smiled into my eyes.

"It is possible," she admitted. "Perhaps one day I will tell you the story. It is interesting. But we have other things to talk about now. With the unhappy decease of the Duchess of Vauxmaur, one might have hoped that our

friend John Fate would have employed his genius and uncommon diligence in other directions. But no. He has set his heart upon catching me; he has made the case peculiarly his own. Indeed, I doubt, even were he to find me and bring me back to England, that they would be able to do anything now. But Fate would justify his persistence, and I?—well, I should be excessively annoyed. Therefore, you see, Mr. North, to turn Fate into either a Phil Harris or a Duchess of Vauxmaur is the only solution. I am, I may say, sanguine of success, and my plan is this:

“I have taken the Villa Doria, outside the Porta Pia, on the Via Nomentana. It is out by San Agnese, and is entirely hidden from the road in its neglected wilderness of a garden. I have made all arrangements for the reception of Mr. Fate, should he favor me with a call. Now, Mr. North,” she added quickly, “Fate followed you to this hotel, and is at the present moment strolling up and down on the opposite side of the Piazza in the very excellent disguise of a sandy-haired, bewhiskered British tourist—a little over-done, I think. If you are careful, you can get a glimpse of him through these

curtains." She stood aside, and I looked out into the Piazza below.

"By gad!" I exclaimed. "I saw the brute on the train! I never for a moment——"

"Of course you did n't, you dear old thing! How should you? You have done splendidly! You brought him to Rome; now I want you to take him to the Villa Doria."

For the moment I resented this prolonged *rôle* of decoy. It was undignified, and not altogether wise or safe. I had played an unwitting decoy to this man once before, and had suffered ever since from his annoying espionage. But Miriam Lemaire did not give me time to demur.

"You will go outside, Mr. North, and take one of those vetturi from the stand over there and drive to the Villa Doria. Mr. Fate will follow you; will, in all probability, call to see me a few minutes afterwards. When you arrive at the Villa, dismiss the vettura and ask for the Signora Smith. That is the name by which I am known at the Villa. The Contessa Gior-danelli, who lives at the European Hotel, is another person, you see. You will be expected; so will Mr. Fate. But," she added in a whis-

per, "if you tell the servant your name—or, rather show him your card—you will receive a very different reception from that which Mr. Fate will receive when he calls."

"Well," I said, "and what then? What are you going to do?"

"Follow close at your heels and enter the Villa by a way known only to myself. There are some catacombs under the garden and house," she added, with a humorous twinkle in her beautiful eyes.

"And then?"

"You shall see. All I ask you to do now is merely to drive to the Villa and inquire for the Signora Smith. There—I'm sure you don't mind doing that for me, do you?"

A few minutes afterwards I was driving down the Via Venti Settembre towards the Porta Pia, and I had the doubtful satisfaction of observing in a carriage close behind me the middle-aged British tourist, in a rather too loud check suit. If the man was John Fate, the disguise was superb. I should never have recognized him.

The Villa Doria, a mile beyond the City Gate, was precisely as Miriam Lemaire had described it. We drove through the carriage gates, through

a very untidy garden of tangled undergrowth and weeds, to the terrace. Just as we swung off from the main road, the British tourist drove by. He was smoking a very aggressive pipe, and he did not so much as deign to look at me. He was posing over a guide-book.

I rang the bell, and my summons was almost instantly answered by a tall young man-servant, in shabby and ill-fitting livery. The vestibule looked like the garden—unkempt and uncared for.

"Is the Signora Smith at home?" I asked in Italian of the servant.

"Yes, sir," he answered promptly in English; "she his. Step hinside, sir."

I did so, and was promptly shown into a sort of anteroom at the back of the large hall.

"What name shall I say, sir?" asked the English servant.

I gave him my card, and as he glanced keenly at it he appeared very much disappointed.

"This way, sir," he added, and after a long pause he escorted me up a broad and elegant Renaissance staircase to the first floor, down a spacious corridor, to a large and comfortably furnished sitting-room of a study, the windows

of which overlooked the garden and—through the trees, which were already losing their copper leaves—the road.

“The Signora will be with you in a few moments, sir,” said the man, retiring.

As I looked out of the window, keeping well in the background, I was not at all surprised to see the sandy-haired British tourist walk into the garden from the road and stare about him, as if he imagined he had come upon the Colosseum or the Baths of Caracalla by mistake, for he constantly referred to his guide-book, and drew steadily nearer the house.

I watched him with keen interest, and did not hear Miriam Lemaire enter the room. She spoke to me, and I wheeled, taken by surprise.

“Already?” I exclaimed. “However did you manage it?”

“By following with a faster horse and driving by a shorter way,” she laughed. “I have one of my automobiles here. I see,” she laughed, “that you have accomplished it. He has taken the bait. You are a most successful decoy, Mr. North.”

“Have you any further use for my services?” I asked, a little ironically.

"Yes," she said. "Have you a revolver?"

I told her I had.

"Is it loaded?"

"Yes," I said; "but if you think I'm going to use it here, you are greatly mistaken."

"I don't anticipate for a moment that you will want to use it, Mr. North; but I suppose I may assume that if—if, I say—it came to a matter of personal violence, I might rely on your standing by me?"

"I suppose so," I answered morosely; "but I've no taste for a fight."

"Well, all I ask you to do is to sit there,"—she drew aside a rich, tapestried curtain, covering a fairly large alcove on one side of the room,—
"and to show no sign of your presence unless I call for help. Then, in that highly improbable contingency—well, circumstances will determine your course of action."

"I don't half like this thing," I protested. "But, as I've gone so far, I suppose I've got to go through with it. What is going to happen?"

"You'll soon see," she replied enigmatically.

The shabby English footman entered the room, bearing a card on a silver salver. If it

were possible for a servant to wink at his mistress, assuredly the man winked.

"An Henglish gentleman, madam, 'as called to know if 'e may 'ave the permission of the lydy of the 'ouse to look at the staircyse and the Guido Reni ceiling."

Miriam motioned me to my alcove. She was laughing silently as she read on the card: "Sir David Mackenzie Browne."

"Show the gentleman up here, Simpson," she said; adding, before the man had left the door: "Remember your instructions."

Then she sat down and took up an illustrated paper. I held my breath, and instinctively my hand went to my hip pocket. My heart was climbing into my throat in a most ridiculous fashion. I was shaking with excitement. I gripped the folds of the curtain and glued my right eye to a minute opening. I could command the whole salon.

In less than a minute Simpson appeared again, followed by the British tourist, carying his Baedeker and his camera, with his field-glasses strapped across his back.

"How do you do, Mr. Fate," said Miriam Lemaire sweetly. "I am charmed to meet you

again. I hope you are quite well." And as she spoke I heard someone lock the door from outside.

The gentleman of the florid complexion and tweeds started.

"Fate?" he said, in a voice with a strong Scotch accent. "I'm afraid, madam, there is some mistake. Me name is Browne. Did ye not get me card? I—I did not mean to intrude upon ye. I merely took the liberty of inquiring o' your servant if you would be so kind as to—" Then he stopped suddenly, for Miriam Lemaire had sprung upon him, and was pulling at his sandy whiskers.

"The disguise is excellent, Mr. Fate," she said, "but it does not deceive me."

"Woman," cried the man, "are ye mad? Stop, I say—stop! Ye're hurtin' me, woman! D'ye want me to forget your sex? This is a most onpardonable liberty ye're takin' wi' me!"

Miriam Lemaire's grip of those sandy whiskers relaxed, and she reeled backwards, clutching at her breast, her face white as paper.

"I—I beg your pardon!" she gasped.

And then I knew. She had been mistaken in believing this man to be John Fate. Whoever

he was, he seemed genuinely alarmed. He ran to the door, only to find it locked. He had dropped kodak and Baedeker, and stood with clenched fists and gleaming eyes.

"Is it a madhouse I've come into?" he cried. "Or are ye thinkin' that ye'll rob me—eh? Oh, it's a weeked city, this! I ought to hae known better. Who are ye, woman? Don't think I'm goin' to stan' any nonsense o' this sort. Pray be so guid as to explain yessel'! What's ye' name, I'd like to know? Or are ye stark, starin' mad?"

Even in that trying moment Miriam Lemaire's nerves and presence of mind did not desert her.

"Sir David Browne," she said, "I humbly apologize to you. I am perfectly sane. I can only hope that you will accept my apologies and my explanations. Of late I have been greatly annoyed by the attentions of a certain person called Fate. I mistook you for him. I thought he had gained admission to my house in disguise; I——"

"Say no more!" exclaimed Sir David Browne. "Ye're talkin' nonsense, poor dear! Pray be so guid as to ring your bell, and let me get oot o' this into th' fresh air again. I'll nae

trouble to look at ye' fifteenth-century staircase or ye' Guido Reni ceiling, as the guide-book talks about."

Already Miriam Lemaire had touched an electric bell, and Sir David, red of face and short of wind, was standing by the door, like an animal at bay, when he must have seen the curtains behind which I was hiding move. In another moment he had dashed across the room and torn them aside, revealing me in, I must confess, a very incriminating position, with a revolver in my hand.

"Guid Heavens!" he cried. "It's a den o' robbers! Ah, would ye trap a poor defenceless mon into a hole an' threaten him with firearms, ye craven-hearted cowards! Why, in the name o' goodness, did I ever come to Italy?"

"Allow me to explain, sir," I commenced, when he peremptorily and rudely cut me short.

"I'll hae none o' your explanations, sir! Ye'll just let me oot o' this place wi'oot another moment's delay, an' if there's ony law or justice in this city o' corruption I'll hae it on both o' ye!"

Miriam looked at me appealingly, and again I tried to mollify him. I gave him my card, and told him that I was prepared to do any-

thing and everything in reason to recompense him. I explained that Mrs. Lemaire was an English lady of unimpeachable character and connections, and begged him to believe that it was all a mistake, and that the last thing we wished in the world was to harm him.

But he would have none of it. He was almost hysterical in his excitement and indignation.

"I'll hae the police on ye both!" he stuttered furiously. "I'm acquainted wi' the Ambassador, and I'll see whether a British subject is to be assaulted and robbed like this!"

"For Heaven's sake, Mr. North," whispered Miriam Lemaire, "do something. It would ruin us both if he does what he says. Promise him anything—everything."

"Sir David," I said desperately, "is there anything we can do to prove to you that we meant no harm to you personally?"

"Yes," he snapped fiercely, "there is. Just ye come wi' me, both o' ye, roond to the British Ambassador. The cab's waitin' outside."

"Sir David," said Miriam Lemaire, "I am quite prepared to accompany you, provided, if you find Mr. North is who he says he is, you will

accept our apologies, and say nothing about this unfortunate affair."

"All right," said Sir David grudgingly.

Once in the open air Sir David's temper considerably abated, and he even consented to listen to Miriam's explanations without any more explosive interruptions; and, when he reached the gate, where his vettura was awaiting him, he really seemed so relieved to find himself safe and sound that he actually murmured a lame sort of an apology.

"Ye're no behavin' like criminals," he said, "an' I suppose ye're tellin' me the truth. Perhaps it's not worth while to make a fuss aboot it, after all." He stopped, and smiled quite affably. "Especially," he added, in a voice that made me spring aside and sent every vestige of color from Miriam Lemaire's cheeks, "especially as I have been able to satisfy myself that Mrs. Lemaire is living in Rome, and that I have become acquainted with both the Contessa Giordanelli and the Signora Smith." He bowed profoundly.

"John Fate!" gasped Miriam Lemaire.

"The same," smiled the detective. "A false beard does not always come off when it is pulled. How do you do, Mr. North?"

I could only stare speechlessly at the man. It was positively uncanny.

"Well," said Miriam Lemaire defiantly, "are you satisfied?"

"Perfectly," smiled the detective.

"And what do you intend doing?" she demanded fiercely; and I began to wonder whether it was too late even yet, and edged nearer.

Fate observed my action, and his smile of smug satisfaction increased.

"You need not trouble yourself, Mr. North," he said; "I have paid off my old score. I think I am even with you." He bowed again. "I shall not trouble you any more, Mrs. Lemaire," he said. "I am going to see the sights of Rome, and then back to England and to work again."

"I don't understand," murmured Miriam Lemaire. "Do you mean that—that you do not intend to—to serve your warrant—to have me extradited?"

"I have no warrant," said the detective. "That business was dropped months ago. So far as the police are concerned, you could be in London at the present time."

"Still I fail to understand," she said, bewildered. "Why are you here?"

"Mrs. Lemaire," said John Fate, "you played me a pretty game when you gave me the slip and got away from England, and I swore I'd be even with you. I'm more or less my own master, and I went to the trouble and expense of continuing the case on my own account, after Scotland Yard had dropped you for want of prosecutors. I swore to find you and face you. I've done it; that's all. Now I'll wish you a good-day and a safe return to England. Good-day to you, Mr. North."

And, so saying, he raised his hat, climbed into the waiting vettura and drove off.

Perhaps it would be as well to pass over what Miriam Lemaire said to me then, or what I said to her.

Suffice it to say that we dined together at the European, and I left for London by the night express.

Two days afterwards I sent her a telegram, telling her she might safely return.

Which she did; and a week afterwards I had the pleasure of dining with her at her little house in Park Street. The exile had returned.

IX

THE AMERICAN COMBINE

FOR years the newspapers had been printing eager gossip of Mr. Jefferson Lloyd, and, though very little was known of him personally, his name was in everybody's mouth. At the time of which I write, not one person in a hundred knew what he looked like, but the other ninety-nine talked of him, argued about him, and, especially, envied him his great wealth.

I suppose it will say itself that he was an American. We do not have multi-billionaires in England. It was commonly said of him that he was so rich that the United States government contemplated passing laws to restrain him as a national menace. His name suggested trusts, gigantic industrial combines, corners in every known commodity—the tyranny of sheer wealth over every law, human and divine.

He had started in life, like many other great Americans, as an office-boy—at least, so said

current rumor; and before he was thirty-five tradition had it that he had made and lost several fortunes. This, however, was before he became a public character; before the day of the spectacular corner in Amalthracite, in which Lloyd broke half a dozen well-known multi-millionaires and made his bow to the world of great speculations.

From that time on he never lost; the cards he played were always played to win. From one height of frenzied finance to another he climbed, until at length his was a name to conjure with, and his personality a thing to be feared—if you happened to be on the other side of the market.

For some years he contented himself with exploiting his own countrymen; but later his influence began to be felt in England. It may be needless to say that he was as heartily disliked as he was feared. Stories there were of his ruthlessness in his dealings with others which would account for the bitterest prejudice. It was said that he never spared an opponent; that the man or woman who opposed him was crushed in the dollar-mill until the unfortunate victim came out dust.

It was at the time that Mr. Jefferson Lloyd

was in London, stringing his wires for the control of the wheat market, that I had the pleasure of meeting him face to face. The manner of our meeting was somewhat peculiar. It was just after the Christmas season. I had been spending the holidays with relatives in Cheshire, and was returning to London in a smoking-compartment, the only other occupant of which was a small, quiet, clean-shaven man, who smoked as if he had the day before him, and read many newspapers.

It is not British habit to scrape acquaintance with chance travelling companions, and for a full hour my *vis-à-vis* respected the English tradition. Then he came to the last match in his box, asked me for one when his cigar went out the next time, and in five minutes we were discussing train speeds, and, quite incidentally, comparing English records with American.

From the fact that my companion warmly defended the American practice of train speeding—and no otherwise—I guessed his nationality. Estimating him as he talked, I fancied he was a retired New York merchant, comfortably provided for, and possibly in Europe for the sake of the wife and daughters.

Since he was an American, our talk drifted naturally to the great wheat combine, and to Jefferson Lloyd. I fancy I may have been a little patronizing. Our civilization is so much older than America's that it is not always easy to be as charitable as one should be. Be that as it may, I remember that I attacked Mr. Lloyd's business methods rather sharply, saying that he might gamble with the necessities of life in his own country, but that he would find himself very much mistaken if he thought he could buy up and corner Canada's visible supply, as he had Russia's. I flatter myself that I know Political Economy like a book. It is one of my gifts; and had I taken my father's advice I should doubtless have been Chancellor of the Exchequer instead of a dilettante nomad with quattro-cento art for a hobby. This by the way, while my smoking-compartment companion was saying mildly:

' "Oh, I think you are mistaken, or, at least, a little prejudiced. For myself, I have acquired the habit of trusting Mr. Lloyd's methods implicitly. You must admit that they are commonly successful."

"Success is no criterion of justice," I re-

torted. "There are criminals and criminals, my dear sir, and not all of the most guilty are punished. The poor wretch who steals a loaf of bread is promptly dragged into court, while your magnificent robbers like this man Lloyd steal the grain crop of an entire nation and go scot free."

I don't remember that I said anything worse than this, but there was more of the same kind; my companion mildly defending Lloyd and the Americans, while I was hotly accusing both.

When we arrived at Euston Terminal my fellow traveller took a card from his case.

"Would you mind exchanging with me?" he asked, in the same mild tone.

Ordinarily, I don't exchange cards with every Tom, Dick, and Harry who happens to occupy the same compartment with me, but this time I broke my rule. Imagine my consternation when I read on the correct bit of pasteboard the engraved line:

"Mr. Jefferson Lloyd."

I think I should have bolted if I had not been ashamed to run away. All the stories I had ever heard of Lloyd's vindictiveness came crowd-

ing into my mind. I had already given him my card; he knew me; he could trace me, find out how my small fortune was invested, buy me out, beat me down with the terrible money-flail. Was it lurking malice that twinkled in his small gray eyes when he said pleasantly:

"I am glad to know you by name, Mr. North. I hope you will find time to look me up at the Savoy. I shall always be glad to see you."

This was what he said, and it was enough to give me a very uncomfortable half-hour. When I reached my rooms, I found a note from Miriam Lemaire, asking me to dine with her on the second day following. She was in London, and in the informal note of invitation she said that she would be at the Park Street house until she should leave for Monte Carlo, early in February.

It was not until I had read the note a second time that I noticed the date. It was two days old, and I was barely in time to answer it in person. When I reached the house in Park Street, Miriam Lemaire met me at the door.

"I'm so glad you have come. You will be immensely entertained," she laughed.

"I am always entertained when I come to you," I replied, drawing freely upon my stock

of gallantry. "But what is the particular attraction this evening?"

"I meant to save it for a surprise, but—have you ever heard of Mr. Jefferson Lloyd?"

"Great Heavens!" I ejaculated. "You don't mean to say he is coming?"

"No; because he is already here; up-stairs talking American to Lady Tollent. But you seem startled; do you know him?"

I nodded grimly, wondering whether I could make any possible excuse and escape.

"How did you come to know him?" I asked, walking up stairs beside her, the most unwilling victim of malicious circumstances.

"I might say that I know everybody who is worth knowing," she said lightly. "But I have met this Mr. Lloyd only once. I thought him very amusing, and I want to ask a favor of you. Will you make yourself particularly agreeable to Lady Tollent this evening?"

"Certainly, if you desire it—and without asking why," I replied promptly.

"You may know the 'why,'" she laughed. "For reasons which may appear later, I wish to have the American multi-billionaire entirely to myself. *Vous savez ?*"

"Je savez plus parfaitement," I nodded.
"But—er—what is the game?—if I may be bold enough to ask. Are you interested in the grain corner?"

"Immensely."

"Financially?" I queried.

She shrugged her beautiful shoulders.

"Even that may be possible," she admitted.

"You don't mean to say that you are joining this foreigner in his monstrous conspiracy to send up the price of bread?"

"I did n't say that," she retorted. "I may be fighting him for aught you know. But in any event I shall have bread enough."

"He—he'll break you!" I burst out.

Again she shrugged. It was her one French trait, and I do not think she was a French-woman.

"We shall see what we shall see," she said coolly, as we reached the drawing-room.

Mr. Jefferson Lloyd seemed genuinely pleased to meet me again, and, though he was most kind, he could not refrain from joking me a little about the incident of the train journey. He interested me exceedingly, as a man whose name was a household word on two continents, and who

had made his enormous power felt around the world. A most commonplace, ordinary gentleman he seemed; and I caught myself wondering more than once if this could really be the great Jefferson Lloyd who held the markets of the world in the hollow of his palm.

I studied him closely, though I complied with Miriam Lemaire's request and devoted myself to pretty Lady Tollent. There were a number of other people at dinner, but they have as little to do with this story as Lady Tollent has, so they may be ignored. From the moment when he was free to do so, the American attached himself to his hostess, and it was evident that he was much struck with her beauty and charm. I also remarked that Miriam Lemaire went far out of her way to be particularly gracious to Lloyd. I had understood that Lloyd belonged to that entirely inconceivable class of men called "woman-haters," but on this occasion he certainly did nothing to prove the accusation.

I wondered, as I chatted with Lady Tollent about the Deceased Wife's Sister Bill, and other banal commonplaces, what it was that Miriam Lemaire wanted of the American.

Later, I came to the conclusion that both hostess and guest were playing a game; that it was a match in which the skilfullest money juggler of his time was pitted against the keenest and shrewdest feminine wit of the age. I am not a sporting man, but if I had been I should not have known which way to lay my bets. It was the old problem of what will happen when the irresistible moving body meets the immovable fixed body.

When I bade my charming hostess good-night, she seemed sufficiently pleased with herself. When I left the drawing-room, Lloyd was in the smoking-room, comfortably enjoying himself with one of his costly Regalias, and looking as if he were in no hurry to leave. Miriam went with me to the door, and at the final moment she said:

“Must you go so early? I wish you could stay and help us make up another set of bridge.” Then in a low undertone, that the servants might not hear: “Please stay, for my sake. I may need you.”

Of course, I stayed, and we made up a set and played bridge. There were four of us. Lady Tollent had gone, but Craven made the

fourth. In the second hand I observed that Mr. Lloyd did not appear to be quite himself; he was pale and abstracted, and once or twice I thought he made as if he would rise from his chair.

At length his condition became so apparent that I said: "I fear you are not quite well, Mr. Lloyd," and while the words were still on my lips he collapsed over his cards and sank fainting in his chair.

Miriam Lemaire was quite calm and collected, as she always was in emergencies. Craven and I lifted the American to a sofa, opened the window, and did the things one usually does under such trying circumstances. But Mr. Lloyd remained persistently unconscious.

I began to grow alarmed and spoke to Miriam Lemaire. "Would n't you better ring up a doctor?" I suggested.

But Craven went me one better. "Let me go around and bring Thumber; he's only five doors below you," he proposed.

"Thank you," said our hostess gratefully. "If you will be so good," and Craven vanished. No sooner was he gone and we two were left alone with the silent figure on the sofa, then she turned quickly to me.

"Now, Mr. North," she said, with her eyes flashing, "go you to the telephone and ring up Lord Eckstein. Quickly, if you please! Tell him to come here immediately—without the loss of a moment."

"Lord Eckstein!" I gasped.

"Yes," she snapped; adding one word: "Go."

I did her bidding with my brain in a whirl. Lord Eckstein was at the moment the leading banker and financier in Europe, and was the subject of the intensest public interest in connection with the great corner in wheat. He stood for England, as Jefferson Lloyd stood for himself and America. Why should Miriam Lemaire want these two giants to meet in her house, under such peculiar circumstances? Eckstein was England's bulwark; and all England had been asking temerarily if he would yield to the tremendous pressure Jefferson Lloyd was bringing to bear.

On my return I stopped hesitantly in the corridor. I would have given worlds to ask Miriam Lemaire a question, but I could not find the words to frame it. I drew a step nearer to the dropped portières and stopped again, this time in something like horror.

Miriam Lemaire was leaning over the prostrate man, going through his pockets with lightning-like dexterity and rapidity. I stood rooted to the spot, staring dumfounded, holding my breath and forgetting all about Lord Eckstein and the telephone summons.

At length she found what she had apparently been seeking—a small pocketbook—which she quickly slipped into her bosom, giving a sharp little exclamation of satisfaction. Then, before I could move—run—vanish, she crossed the room like a flash of light, snatched aside the portière, and we stood face to face.

“Mr. North!” she exclaimed. “You here? you saw?”

“Yes,” I admitted. “I could not well help seeing.”

The light that came suddenly into her eyes was fairly demoniacal.

“I did not think you were a spy!” she hissed, almost venomously, I thought.

“You ought to know that I am not in intention,” I protested, thinking only of making my peace with a woman who might slay me.

“Surely you can trust me.”

“You have left me no choice,” she said

moodily. And then: "I have trusted you before, but it is possible for even you to know too much, Mr. North. Ah, well; let it go. You will merely add 'common thief' to the other choice little descriptive phrases you have doubtless been applying to me."

"What is in the pocketbook?" I asked, growing suddenly bold. "And do you mean to keep it?"

"Oh, dear, no!" she laughed, her mood changing in the turning of a wind-blown leaf. "I merely wanted to find Mr. Lloyd's private telegraphic code. I was afraid he might not give it to me if I should ask him, so——"

"You mean to say that you—but I can't believe it!"

"Oh, but you may—it's true. It was in his liqueur. It is perfectly harmless, slow to take effect, but very sure. He will be unconscious for a full half-hour yet. What did Lord Eckstein say?—but never mind; I'll go and talk to him myself."

"Are you working for Lord Eckstein?"

"I am working for myself," she said, rather grimly.

"Is it the wheat affair?"

She nodded.

“And what are you trying to do? Are you for Lloyd and America? or for us?”

She made a charming little *moue* at me. “I told you I was for myself. I am at present engaged in earning—or securing—a very considerable sum of money. But if I stop to tell you all about it, I may make a failure. Go in there and be nice to Mr. Lloyd—he won’t ask much of you in his present condition—while I——”

“One moment: what do you want with his private cable code?”

“What a silly, silly question! What should I want with it save to be able to send some cablegrams?”

“Then you are against him?”

She put her face close to mine.

“I mean to break him! See—I am taking you at your word and trusting you to the limit. Now go and look after him till Mr. Craven returns with the doctor, and leave me to talk to Lord Eckstein over the ’phone.”

What she said to the great financier I do not know. But I do know that in the shortest possible time his Lordship came around from his house in Park Lane to the house in Park Street,

and that he was closeted with Miriam Lemaire while Dr. Thumber, Craven, and I applied restoratives to the unconscious American.

It was over half an hour after his sudden seizure before Mr. Lloyd opened his eyes, closed them again, and sat up groping as one just awakened out of a sound sleep.

"Dear me!" he said mildly; and then he yawned. "Have I been asleep?" he asked, looking from one to another of us.

"You have had an ill turn," said the doctor.

"Ah!" said Mr. Lloyd; "then I have been unconscious?"

"For fully half an hour," said Craven, whose fault it is always to talk too much.

I think I was the only one who saw or noted the crafty look that came and went in the small gray eyes. Came and went, I say, for it was gone in a twinkling, and the American instantly took up his part again; the rôle of a man just recovering from an attack of illness.

"I—I feel considerably shaken," he said; "a little brandy and water, if I may trouble you, gentlemen." And when he had taken it: "Ah! that is better. Now if I may apologize to our

hostess, and afterwards ask one of you to put me into a cab——”

We help him on both counts. Craven said he would go to the Savoy with the sick man, and Miriam Lemaire was sent for. She came down stairs radiant, and was so full of sympathy and affected concern that I, who knew all, could scarcely credit the evidence of my own senses.

“You will not forget to-morrow and our drive together, Mr. Lloyd,” she said genially, at the hand-shaking.

“I shall sooner forget my name,” replied the magnate gallantly. “I am so sorry to have given you unnecessary alarm. It is quite humiliating, I assure you, my dear madam. Good-night, Mr. North; good-night, Doctor. Send me your bill to the Savoy, if you please.”

When the footman had closed the door upon the three of them, and I was alone with Miriam Lemaire, I said:

“His pocketbook—did you keep it?”

“Of course not,” she denied. “I slipped it into his coat pocket as we shook hands. Did n’t you see me do it?”

“You are too deft with your fingers; very

much too deft, my dear lady. I suppose you acquired the needed information before you returned Mr. Lloyd his property?"

"I did, indeed," she laughed. "Come up stairs and join us in our deliberations. You will enjoy the experience, and afterwards you may take to yourself the credit of saving this dear, conceited little island from what you are all calling a national danger."

"But hold on," I demurred. "Does Eckstein know that I am in the game—as an on-looker? It is not quite—er—fair and above-board, is it?"

"Any means to the end," she retorted. "And even you will admit that the end is good."

"To break the wheat corner?"

"Surely."

"But Eckstein?"

"He knows you know. I have told him you are a friend of mine and a man to be trusted. And we shall want a little more of your assistance. You know Eckstein, of course?"

"Oh, yes; I know him privately. He is rather—well——"

"I understand," she interrupted. "But he is a great man, none the less; and he won't hurt

you. He is as harmless as a lamb, and as easy to fool as—well, as you are.”

“Thanks, awfully. Lead on; I’m ready.”

Eckstein greeted me with effusive, not to say offensive, patronage.

“Mrs. Lemaire has been telling me that you are a party to our benevolent little plot, Mr. North,” he said unctuously. “I am glad to know that we have so shrewd a gentleman as yourself for an ally. You fully understand the situation?”

I glanced at Miriam Lemaire and she came to my rescue.

“Mr. North understands that I have agreed to put your lordship in the way of squaring accounts with a financial opponent,” she said. And then to me: “I happen to be very well acquainted with Mr. Lloyd’s secretary, who accidentally let drop a hint which led to the plan I suggested to Lord Eckstein. The hint pointed to the fact that Mr. Lloyd had a private telegraphic code, known only to himself and to his confidential representatives in America; and the hint conveyed the further information that he always carried this code with him wherever he went—he never trusted it out

of his possession. You know how we obtained it."

"You are a most wonderful woman, Mrs. Lemaire!" said his lordship, rubbing his fat hands together.

"And now that you have this code?" I asked.

"We shall use it most effectively. Lloyd wishes England to join with America in cornering the wheat supply of the world. He speaks for America, himself, and, of course, Lord Eckstein represents England's finances; so it is between these two gentlemen. But Mr. Lloyd's price to us is a million sterling short of what Lord Eckstein demands. and every day's delay adds some hundreds of thousands to the difference. You see, Mr. Lloyd has the whip hand, and he is confidently using it. Now, if Jefferson Lloyd wires his agents in America to-night that the terms with Lord Eckstein are agreed upon, what happens?"

"But he won't!" I blundered.

The subtle craft I had seen in her eyes once or twice before came again.

"I think you are mistaken, Mr. North. Someone—presumably Mr. Lloyd, since no one else has his code—will send such a wire to-night

to the American subordinates. To-morrow's papers will be full of it, and the corner will break unless—unless Mr. Lloyd confesses himself outwitted and agrees to Lord Eckstein's terms; as he most assuredly will."

"Oh," said I. "Then the corner will be preserved, only it will then be Lord Eckstein's corner. I suppose the effect will be the same; high prices for bread—starving people——"

"Oh, my dear Mr. North, you are not turning moralist at this time of life, surely!" she derided. And Eckstein added:

"The market would better be controlled from London than from Chicago; you'll admit that, Mr. North?"

"I'll keep my own opinions," I said grimly. "They are not much good to any one else, and they certainly would not influence you. But Mrs. Lemaire said something about my being able to help you."

"Yes," she broke in, with an anxious glance at the clock, "and the very minutes are precious. We are going to ask you to send the telegrams to America."

"I? But, my dear lady——"

"Not a word, if you love me—George!" she

protested. "See, they are all ready. You have only to drop them into the office."

Eckstein produced them from his pocket.

"You see, Mr. North," he explained suavely, "we can't afford to have this traced to us. Unfortunately, I, or any one connected with me, would be known. If you do it, it will excite no remark. And, if you could do it, and then leave by the night boat train for Paris to execute a little art commission for me——"

"Your commission on the commission would quite astonish you, I am sure," put in Miriam Lemaire softly.

I shall always be thankful that I was man enough to stand the thing upon its proper foot.

"I am no connoisseur's agent, Lord Eckstein," I said quite firmly; "and what little I know about quattro-cento art is entirely at your service as between gentlemen and friends. I would n't touch your errand with a hop-pole for money, nor would I go to Paris to-night for any mere business consideration, however remunerative it might prove. But for Mrs. Lemaire I will do both."

And I did. I sent the cablegrams, of course, without knowing a word of what was in them;

and I left England so that the sender of them might not be inconsiderately in the way when the hubbub was raised.

What I read of the great wheat deal in the English papers was either greatly misleading, or something quite unexpected had happened after my departure from London. From what I could gather from the printed reports, the corner had held, and its control was in the hands of Mr. Jefferson Lloyd.

After waiting a full fortnight in the hope of hearing from Miriam Lemaire, I returned to the English capital and lost no time in presenting myself at the house in Park Street. Mrs. Lemaire received me, and her smile was almost rueful.

"You certainly joined yourself to a lost cause, this time, Mr. North," she said, when she had made me welcome.

"How—why?" I began.

"Mr. Lloyd was too shrewd for us; oh, many, many miles too shrewd. He did not drink the drugged liqueur—he spilled it under the table. He did not faint—he merely feigned"—she laughed wanly at the pun. "He heard every word that we said; he was quite conscious

when I picked his pocket. Worse than all, he had prepared a code for us which made our cablegrams actually give us away to his confidential agents in America. Isn't it too delicious?"

"The scoundrel!" I ejaculated.

"Oh, no," she cooed softly. "He is a very brilliant man, Mr. North. If I could have made him ask me, I should assuredly have married him."

"But your profit?" I gasped.

"Lord Eckstein is more of a gentleman than you thought he was. He paid me, without discounting Mr. Lloyd's shrewdness. Money lending, Mr. North, is a business requiring large capital; and I have increased my capital. And money is power. Moreover, I did my best for poor starving England, and so did you, *mon ami*. Let us be happy in our good intentions."

X

ONE OF HER VICTIMS

It was in the year following the Jefferson Lloyd incident that I went with Cassilis, Mason, and Trumble for a six months' expedition into Equatoria. Cassilis was the leading spirit. Ostensibly his object was to study the fish-life of the Victoria Nyanza. Mason thought only of big game, while Trumble got his expenses paid by a good newspaper. As for myself, I joined the party without having any particular object in view other than my natural love for travel.

We all four reached our appointed destination. I was the first to go down with fever, and Mason and Trumble promptly followed suit. Mason and Trumble died. I recovered; but in three months Cassilis and I decided that we had had enough. So we went back to the coast, sadder and wiser men.

When Cassilis and I, with our baggage, guns,

camp, and servants, arrived at Mombassa, on the East Coast, we were sufficiently convinced that central Africa was no place for us. I was shattered in health, a wreck in mind, nerve, and body. Cassilis was, as he had been all through, as fit as an athlete.

A few days afterwards, we left in a British India boat for Europe. Since it was then February, the Red Sea was quite pleasant, and we disembarked at Suez and took train to Cairo. It was at the suggestion of Cassilis, who wanted to meet a friend of his who was then staying at the Continental Hotel.

"It'll do you ~~wor~~ds of good, you know—Cairo in February," said Cassilis. "Pull you together no end."

Cassilis was a well-set-up, well-groomed, healthy-minded man of forty, who was specially noted as a good all-round sportsman. But everyone knew that he was poor, an Irish baronet with a tumble-down castle in Kerry, with a tenantry that had never been known to pay rents. Sir Terence Fitz George Patrick Cassilis, baronet—that was his full name, style, and title—had a hobby or two—the central African fish was one of them—but no profession,

though he was commonly lucky at backing horses. Yet he always lived up to the rate of ten thousand a year—and more. He was a bachelor, it is true; but those who had known his father, who had lived like a hermit in two rooms in Jermyn Street, wondered how the new baronet managed to make the show he did.

Nevertheless, we were content to take Cassilis as we found him, and to congratulate ourselves when he did not borrow money of us. After all, what concern was it of mine how he made his money?

We had been at Cairo a couple of days before I discovered that Cassilis was there on business rather than pleasure. The place was crowded with English and Americans. I did not see much of Sir Terence during those first two days. He told me he was looking up some friends he wanted to see. We put up at the Shepherd's. That was how I ran into the arms of my aunt Selina and my cousin Erda Ffrench, who were staying there.

One morning Erda and I were sitting outside, discussing family matters, when the totally unexpected happened. We saw Cassilis and Miriam Lemaire approaching.

I had not the remotest idea that she was in Cairo, or that she knew Cassilis. She looked as radiantly beautiful as ever and her face was just a little tanned. She was dressed in a white box-cloth riding-costume, and wore a Panama hat.

"Why, Mr. North!" she cried, giving me both hands. "This is an unexpected pleasure! I had n't the remotest idea you were here. You look ill. What is the matter? Don't tell me you've had the fever! Why did n't you tell me, Terry?" She turned to Cassilis.

"Did n't know you knew each other," he answered, a little shortly, I thought.

Erda Ffrench gave me to understand that I might introduce Miriam Lemaire. Five minutes afterwards the two women were talking dresses and hats, and Cassilis took me aside.

"Look here, North," he said quietly, "how long have you known her?"

"Mrs. Lemaire?"

"Yes. I had n't any idea that——"

"Oh! a long time—years," I interrupted.

"But you never told me."

"Neither did you; and she calls you 'Terry,'" I laughed. But Cassilis frowned.

"I'm sorry," he said.

"Sorry? For what?"

"Well, I'm sorry you know her, because—well, it will make it difficult—awkward! Oh, hang it! What am I talking about?"

I stared at him in blank bewilderment. He was so utterly different from the careless, devil-may-care fellow I knew. Cassilis the Magnificent, as he was sometimes dubbed, had a trouble on his mind—of that there was no manner of doubt.

Miriam Lemaire joined us a minute afterwards, before I could investigate this new phase.

"Mr. North," she said, "I want to talk to you. You, Terry, go and talk to Miss Ffrench; I'll tell you when I need you."

I could hardly suppress a smile at this new state of affairs. The idea of Miriam Lemaire ordering Cassilis about like a nineteen-year-old subaltern amused me.

"Mr. North," said Miriam Lemaire, when we were alone, "I can't tell you how intensely annoyed I am to find you in Cairo."

"And why?" I asked.

"Because," she replied, "I am engaged in a most important piece of business, and you have

a most provoking habit of turning up at the wrong time and interfering in affairs which are not any concern of yours. I thought you were shooting pigmies in central Africa, or whatever you do shoot there."

"He has told you about our expedition?"

"Yes; and by the death of Colonel Mason I shall be a heavy loser."

"You mean that Mason owed you money?"

She shrugged her shapely shoulders.

"A few thousand," she said, "which I don't suppose his executors will be able to pay, even if they would. It's one of my risks."

"You are ubiquitous," I said.

"At present," she retorted, "I'm perilously near being hard up—hence my annoyance at finding you here. Mr. North, I like you very much in any private capacity, but I abhor you when it comes to business."

"And how about Cassilis?" I asked.

"Oh! Cassilis does n't count," she replied, laughing.

"Why?"

She glanced apprehensively in his direction.

"You need not speak so loudly," she said, and then dropped her voice. "Terry," she

added, with a curious gleam in her inscrutable eyes, "is one of my most useful agents. Mind, Mr. North"—she raised her finger warningly—"that is a profound secret. I ought not to have told you."

I confess that it gave me something of a shock. Perhaps this explained the lavish expenditure of Terence the Magnificent.

Two days afterwards, feeling much better, I was dining with Manvers at the Khedival Club.

"Do you happen to know," he said to me, when we were sitting over our coffee and cigars, "what is the matter with Cassilis?"

"So you've noticed it too?" I said, a little cautiously.

"Who could help it? I don't know him very well, but if I did I think I should keep an eye on him. He's badly hit somewhere!"

I was feeling almost well again; but Cassilis grew paler and more haggard day by day, and, on the last occasion when we dined together, I noticed that he was drinking more than was good for him. Cassilis, with all his extravagant mode of living, had always been a most temperate man.

I remonstrated when he had half demolished a bottle of Cognac; and he grew suddenly very grave.

"North," he said huskily, "I'm thinking of making a somewhat premature exit from this world to-night. I've had enough of it."

"Man alive!" I exclaimed, genuinely alarmed at his manner. "What is the matter?"

"Oh, nothing; only I'm owing thousands, and have something less than a five-pound note in the world. I've been a fool—a purblind idiot, North; and there's no getting out of the hole this time. I'm a goner!" He laughed unpleasantly.

Never have I seen such a complete change in a man before. He looked years older, and he spoke as if he meant what he said.

"Tell me," I said; "is there no way out of it?"

"None," he replied. "Pshaw! What does it matter, after all? I've had a good time of it, North; and I've got the sense to know when to go. The time has come. This is our farewell dinner." Again he laughed. "I ought never to have come here; but I could n't help myself. I've been nothing more or less than a

slave. Bah! But why should I maunder on like this? It has been my own fault. I can't blame anyone else. I've been a fool; but I'm not a cad, nor am I a coward either." He rose unsteadily. "Good-bye, old man. I'm going for a stroll."

"No, you are not—not now! Sit down!"

Something in my tone must have impressed him, for he obeyed me.

"Is n't it possible that I can help you?" I asked.

"Not unless you'd like to throw away a fortune."

"To whom do you owe it?"

"You know. Why need you ask?"

"Miriam Lemaire?"

"Yes."

"You fool!" I exclaimed impatiently. "What could have possessed you to put yourself in her hands?"

"No words of yours can add to my degradation, North. I've always paid her interest regularly and made it up to her in other ways, which we need not discuss. It's not creditable. I've been her tool, her decoy!" His fine eyes burned with sullen fire. "And she's a fiend, North—a vampire!"

"But when did the crisis come? Surely things were all right when we started for Uganda?"

"Everything might have been all right now, if poor Mason had n't gone under with the fever," said Cassilis bitterly.

"What had Mason to do with it?"

"Why, I had backed some of his bills. He had borrowed of her, too—a few thousands, on the usual terms. He died. I'm let in for his liabilities. She won't renew. So I'm in for a double batch."

"But surely you can make some arrangement?" I urged.

"She can be adamant when she chooses. She wants the money; she has a big game on somewhere—Heaven knows what it is! I've got to pay—and I can't."

"And what good will putting a bullet into your brain do?" I asked contemptuously.

"Save me a lot of trouble—disgrace."

"Pshaw! Why not live it down?"

"No," he retorted grimly.

"How the deuce will your death help her?"

"Insurance," remarked Cassilis, with a short, unpleasant laugh. "I'm insured up to the hilt. Policies all assigned to her agents. Don't

you see? She tempted me, she gave me capital, and I got her known at the clubs, and for a long time won a bit by racing and cards; and I got her several good bits of business, in return for which she gave me back a percentage in returned bills or further advances. Oh, but I've had a ripping time, North."

"How did you meet her?" I asked, for I was deeply interested in this painful confession.

"I met her at Sandford Hall—the Warrenshires' place—and fell head over heels in love with her. The rest followed naturally; it was fate, preordained, just as the end was inevitable. This is the end. I have always known that it would come, just as a man always knows that he has to die, though he never lets himself think of it."

I was very sorry for Cassilis, because I liked him immensely, and we had of late become almost like brothers. I fully appreciated the fact that he had behaved like an ass; but then, most of us are asses, more or less.

"Look here," I said, after a long pause, "how much do you need to tide it over?"

He shook his head despondingly.

"No, no, old man!" he exclaimed, impul-

sively gripping my arm. "I know what you're thinking about, but it's quite impossible. It runs into thousands."

"Would five thousand help you? If so, I think I could get it. I will wire to London at once."

He stopped me with a mirthless laugh.

"If you said fifteen you'd still be a long way short," he said.

"Whew!" I drew in a long breath.

"You must n't think of it, North," he said. "But I thank you just the same." His voice broke, and he rose unsteadily and held out his hand. "Forget everything I've said, and—and, well, the sooner you forget me, too, the better!"

"Cassilis!" I exclaimed, "I insist on your listening to reason. Give me your permission to see Mrs. Lemaire on your behalf."

"It would be worse than useless. You don't know her; and then, she's a woman."

"I rather fancy I know her better than you do," I retorted. "Anyhow, I'm going to see her, whether you like it or not. I don't think I shall come away without getting what I want. Sit tight, Cassilis. Wait until you hear from me."

I went around to Miriam Lemaire's hotel. She saw me at once, and seemed quite pleased that I had come.

"Mr. North," she said, "I'm in an awful tangle. I have the chance of a lifetime. I could rule a state if I could only draw a cheque for fifty thousand pounds to-night. It is the most distressing luck. But how very solemn you look! What is the matter?"

"I have come around to see you," I said gravely, "to ask a personal favor."

"If it is n't money I'll grant it. But, really, Mr. North, I'm hard up. I've been overstepping the limit lately, and now, just when I least expected it, a great—a unique—chance has come to me. There's going to be a big row in San Lorenzo."

"Is there?" I said absently.

"You know all about it, I suppose?"

"Vaguely."

"Which means that you don't, so I'll tell you. Sit down. Now, as to San Lorenzo——"

"How much does Cassilis owe you?" I interrupted.

She stared at me blankly and then laughed.

"More than he'll ever pay!" she said coldly.

"But don't let's bother about Terry now. I was speaking of San Lorenzo. I'm deeply interested in affairs there. The President has flown—Señor Don Juan Florez. Prince Isidore is now in Cairo. He leaves for Europe tomorrow. But I see you are ignorant of the facts. San Lorenzo, as you know, has been in a state of constant upheaval for the last forty years. They've had half a dozen revolutions, and have seesawed between their princes and semi-communistic Republics. This state of affairs culminated about four years ago in the establishment of the present stable little Republic."

"Yes," I said irritably, "I remember; Prince Isidore abdicated."

"Just so; and Don Juan Florez has been President ever since, despite a good many abortive attempts on his life. He's a good man and a strong man; but he can never rule San Lorenzo. No one will ever rule San Lorenzo save one man, and that man is ready now. The Republic is bankrupt and proud, and Don Florez is too honest. The tinder has been there all along, and it only wants a man to apply the spark. And that man has come."

"Who is it?" I asked.

"Isidore's son—Isidore the Seventh," she said. "He claims his father's throne, and San Lorenzo, tired of peace and decent government, would rise to a man were he to seize the opportunity."

"At another time this might be interesting but, just now——"

"Prince Isidore needs money," she went on, quite as if I had not spoken. "He has come to me. If I give him what he wants, I could be Queen. But I can't, because I have n't it to lend. That's my luck. He must have money; he will fail without it. If he declares himself in San Lorenzo next week and has money to back him, he wins, and he knows it; so do I. What a chance! I suppose," she said suddenly, "that you are n't disposed to join me with—say twenty thousand? I'd see you properly secured."

I shook my head. The idea was too preposterous.

"Now let me tell you what I came to see you for," I said. "I want you to give Cassilis time."

"Has he sent you?" she asked icily.

"No; I came on my own account. You have been good enough to say many times that you would remember certain little services of mine to you, and I think you will grant me a favor, and accept five thousand pounds on account and give him a year's respite."

She laughed in my face.

"I must have my money," she said.

"But he can't pay you!"

"Men can always get money somehow."

"Not always fairly."

"What difference does that make to me?"

"He talks of suicide," I said.

"Which, if he can't pay me in any other way, is the only decent course open to him. If only he would—to-night! Then I could rule San Lorenzo!"

Cassilis obliged her. When I got back to the hotel he was dead. He had shot himself in his bedroom.

THE STORY OF THE SECOND HUSBAND

I DO not think that Miriam Lemaire ever became very rich, or had any ambition to become richer than she was when Lemaire, the banker, died and left her his fortune. I know that she lost great sums at the card tables, and that there were times when she found herself in very low water. There were other times when her winnings were correspondingly large, and she was, perhaps, far richer than I guessed.

Money-lending to the impecunious plunger—male or female—was in her blood. She could not exist without being in some way connected with an intrigue, without possessing herself of power—power over men and women, to use them as her puppets and playthings. And money was her means—money, which is power.

But the present incident has nothing to do with that side of Miriam Lemaire's character.

It deals with a more personal side of her complex personality, and proves that this remarkable woman had a prodigious fund of sheer brute perseverance and determination, together with an utter disregard of the most sacred, as well as the trivial, principles of common morality.

It had long been known to me that she was determined to marry, and to marry well. She realized that to ally herself to some man of high birth would not only be a great advantage to her in many ways, but would be the best insurance policy she could take out for her old age. Naturally, with such an object in view, she turned to the British peerage.

Three distinct instances there were in which she had played the game of marriage—and lost. The first was with Devilford. Then there was the futile assault upon the affections of Vischoyle. The earl was seventy if he was a day, and he had lived out every hour of his vicious life. I really thought at the time that she was going to make the old rake break his sworn word that he would die a bachelor. Here her money was of no use, for Vischoyle was absurdly rich, and all his wild extravagances had never

seriously affected his fortune. She had laid herself out to charm, fascinate, flatter him, and she might have succeeded had not his sins found him out. He died at Monte Carlo from heart disease, and Miriam Lemaire missed being the Countess of Vischoyle and Polt.

The third instance I have already written of at length. She actually married Vauxmaur, and for a brief hour thought herself a duchess.

Miriam Lemaire was a strong woman; she survived these buffets of tricky fortune, and, at the time of which I write, she began to be seen often with a certain very well known personage, and the gossip began to say that: "That terrible Mrs. Lemaire was about to inveigle poor Lord Dorking into marrying her."

I was inclined to agree with them, though I did not pity Dorking in the least. I rather envied him. We was a great man, the Right Honorable the Earl of Dorking, K.G., his Majesty's Minister of State for Foreign Affairs, and a rich as well as a most accomplished person. He was comparatively young—the baby of the Cabinet; and he looked considerably younger than he really was by virtue of a rosy fresh-colored, clean-shaven face.

He had been married before, and had several children, all of whom looked as old, if not older, than their father. Politically, he was a strong man, and was generally looked upon as the next Prime Minister. By the world of literature and art he was regarded as a generous patron and a man of catholic tastes. He had written two widely read works, one on "Philosophic Religion," and the other on "Byzantine Art of the Fourteenth Century." Indeed, he was a great, a popular, and a coming man, if not exceptionally brilliant and academic; and Miriam Lemaire might well be congratulated on her triumph, if it were ever consummated.

I saw them together frequently, met them at the houses of mutual friends, and heard the gossip aforesaid. Moreover, I observed many things, and was not surprised when I read the announcement that the Foreign Minister was to marry Madame Lemaire, the widow of the late Viennese banker.

But I am afraid I was unique in that respect, and that ninety-nine persons in a hundred were surprised; refused indeed to believe the announcement until it had been repeated and confirmed in several ways.

"Gad, sir," said a clubman to me, "does Dorking know who she is and what she is?"

"I presume so," I remarked. "Most men take the trouble to know something about the women they are going to marry."

"Well, then," exclaimed my friend, "Dorking must be bally mad, that's all I say."

"Or owes her money," suggested a man who had known Gorleston.

"You can't suggest that," I ventured. "A man in Dorking's position is n't going to be bought and sold. He'd have resigned long ago. And, besides, he's as rich as Crsœus. I see no reason why he should not have fallen in love with her. I have done so long ago."

My defence was greeted with somewhat uncomplimentary laughter.

"Oh, you're her Boswell," said Trenewith. "You look upon her as a study—or something of the sort; but I've never observed any particular anxiety on your part to marry her."

I met Mrs. Lemaire in Dover Street a day or two after the announcement had appeared in the papers. She had been calling, she told me, and asked me to let her drive me to my rooms.

I consented and incidentally offered her my congratulations.

"He's a dear thing," she laughed, "but frightfully vulgar and prosy."

Of course, the engagement caused a great flutter of excitement, and was the direct cause of many very extraordinary and very unkind statements. It was not exactly a scandal, because Miriam Lemaire, whatever people thought of her privately, knew everyone, went everywhere, and, indeed, was included in some of the most exclusive sets.

I did not see very much of her at this time, and it was not until early in February, when I was at Monte Carlo, that I had anything in the nature of a private conversation with her. That was some months after the public announcement of the engagement. In the meantime Dor-king had won the Cambridgeshire, and had launched his country into a war with Melanthia.

"Do you know, Mr. North," she said to me one afternoon as we strolled up and down the terrace of the Casino overlooking the sea, "I am very greatly worried. I am being most persistently beset by blackmailers."

“Good Heavens!” I exclaimed. “Black-mailers?”

She nodded.

“You see,” she explained, “all the world knows that I’m going to marry Dorking, and a good many people in the world know that, if they could produce any open scandal around my name, Dorking might be very seriously embarrassed, and indeed might, in the public interest, be justified in breaking off with me.”

“My dear Mrs. Lemaire, what an idea!” I exclaimed. “Who could possibly bring about such a catastrophe?”

“There is at least one person, and possibly two,” she replied, quite coolly. “You see, they know I could afford to pay to stop their mouths. To become the Countess of Dorking and the wife of the next Prime Minister of England is worth something.” Then she added musingly: “If I only knew how far she would go.”

“Ah, a woman,” said I.

“Yes,” she answered. “It is the sister of the late Duchess of Vauxmaur. Of course you remember the remark that the kitchen cat made on that dreadful afternoon?”

I admitted that I had not forgotten it.

"She said I had a husband living," said Miriam Lemaire. "Did you believe it?" She gave me a swift look of inquiry—almost of challenge.

I found it convenient to be interested in the scenery. It was a question that I preferred not to answer, for I was always a clumsy liar.

"You do believe it, then?" she said, with a harsh little laugh. "Well, I'm not surprised."

"My dear Mrs. Lemaire—" I protested; but she cut me short.

"You and I, Mr. North, have always been honest with each other. Do not let us depart from such an admirable precedent. What that vulgar little ballet-dancer said then is true. Before she died, it appears that she passed on the information to her sister—another kitchen cat."

I stared at her blankly. She spoke very much as if she were talking of the most ordinary topic in the world.

"But," I gasped, "he is dead?"

"He is n't anything of the sort. On the contrary, he is very much alive?"

"But, my dear Miriam, are you actually contemplating bigamy with Lord Dorking?"

"Oh, don't call it by such a disagreeable name. I intend to marry Lord Dorking."

"With a husband alive? But perhaps," I exclaimed in a sudden inspiration, "you are separated from him—you are divorced?"

"Dear me, no," she replied coolly. "I only wish I were!"

"Where does he live?"

"At present he honors Monte Carlo."

"Do I know him?"

"I hope not." She laughed a little cynically.

"But," I exclaimed excitedly, "this is really tragic. Is he joining in this scheme of blackmail?"

She nodded and drew in her red lips.

"The Duchess's sister is egging him on. She is poor and she wants money." Then, in a sudden and rare burst of feeling: "I won't give her a penny! No, not a penny! I'll fight it to the death—to somebody's death."

I could not just at the moment see how, if the Vauxmaur woman's sister had such a card to play, Miriam Lemaire was going to have much of a chance to fight.

"Since you know so much," she went on, "you may as well know all there is to know,

and perhaps you will be able to give me the benefit of your valuable advice and experience. Positively, Mr. North, I have never been so annoyed in my life!"

"It's rather hard lines on Dorking," I said, half to myself.

"Nonsense!" she retorted. "Dorking is n't walking the floor—it is hard on *me*. I happen to have a husband who simply won't die. Why won't he die?" she cried fiercely. "I have been waiting years for him to die; but he seems to have as many lives as a cat."

"Who is the gentleman?" I asked.

"I'll point him out to you if you will come into the rooms with me later on."

"Does he play?"

"Yes; and he loses with systematic regularity."

"He must be a gold mine, then."

"He has n't a centime of his own. He plays with my money."

"Oh, it's like that, is it?"

"He has cost me twenty thousand pounds in five years."

"Is he content?"

"Perfectly—or was until this little wretch of a woman came and stirred him up."

“How did her sister find it out?”

“Heavens only knows, unless Vauxmaur told her. In that case, he was not such a fool as either of us took him for. But let me give you the facts. Will it bore you?”

“Bore me? Why, I am gasping with interest!” I exclaimed.

“My second husband is a drunken, dissolute creature, with half a lung and a mania for *trente-et-quarante*. He is sixty-one years of age, and a besotted idiot.”

“Hardly the sort of man I should have imagined your marrying,” I interpolated.

“He was not like that fifteen years ago,” she said slowly, “save as to the half lung—which led me to suppose that a winter in Paris would leave him at Père-la-Chaise and me free to marry again. Since then I have learnt that a man may live a most unconscionable time, and enjoy himself, too, in a way, on half a lung.”

“You say fifteen years ago!” I exclaimed doubtfully. “Surely that must have been before—before you married Lemaire?”

“It was three years before,” she answered nonchalantly.

“Then Lemaire was never really your husband?”

She laughed with quiet amusement.

“How shocked you look, Mr. North! Is it so very dreadful? Let me give you the details. When I married my first husband I had ambition; but it was limited by the four walls of a theatre. He offered me a stepping-stone from—well, nothing to the stage. When he accomplished that, I was done with him. He drank like a fish, went into an asylum for a year, came out, and found that I had disappeared. Then I married Lemaire; and, when next I met my precious husband, I could afford to dictate my own terms. He was perfectly amenable, and not all at extortionate in his demands. All I required of him was never to see me, to speak to me. In return I agreed to pay him a very handsome income. I fully believed every winter would be his last. He does n’t take care of himself in any way, and any ordinary person would have been dead years and years ago. But he lives. I have nothing to complain of in his behavior to me. He has religiously kept his bargain up to a certain point: that was when this little fiend of a woman found him out

and put all sorts of ridiculous ideas into his head."

"But surely, after this lapse of time, you could get a divorce?" I said.

"I could; but to do so would necessitate a mention of dates. My marriage with Leboucher was prior to my marriage with Lemaire. Don't you see?"

I nodded gravely. I did see.

"So," she continued, "I am at present refusing to give a penny to this little cat, with the full knowledge that she can, if she likes, smash me."

"It seems to me a case for some sort of compromise," I suggested weakly.

"But I won't compromise," said Miriam Lemaire fiercely. "I've defied her."

"Then you're prepared to take the risk—I mean about Dorking?"

"It's a desperate situation," she said grimly. "I suppose a solution has n't occurred to you?"

I shook my head.

"If I were you," I said, "I should tell Dorking everything."

"What a delightfully foolish and irrational man you are!" she said. "Do you think Dorking would marry me after that?"

"No," I replied; "but he might wait for you. He must be very fond of you."

"Pshaw! Wait for me—until Leboucher dies? He'll probably outlive Dorking. And then the woman? Why, she'll tell the world, and perhaps Leboucher would assert himself. My dear Mr. North, I can't see any other way out of it."

"Any other way!" I exclaimed. "Then you have thought of a way?"

"Yes," she said in a low voice. "If Leboucher won't die naturally, he'll have to die unnaturally. *Comprenez vous?*"

My recoil was the involuntary start of one who has been petting the harmless, necessary cat, only to find that it is a tiger.

"Come," she said, ignoring my horror, "let us go into the rooms, and you shall see this Monsieur Cesar Leboucher."

"Do you speak to him?" I faltered.

"Dear me, no! He won't notice me."

"And the Duchess of Vauxmaur's sister?"

"Oh, she writes unsigned and undated letters, and sends messages. I hear from Leboucher through her. He demands a hundred thousand down by to-morrow noon, and she another hundred thousand."

"By Jove!" I gasped. "It's a big game."

"She shall never have a centime out of me," said Miriam Lemaire between her teeth.

The man Cesar Leboucher, whom she pointed out to me, was a repulsive-looking person. He was playing like an old hand, and was intent on the game. A pile of gold and a list of numbers and calculations lay on the table in front of him, and his blood-shot fish-like eyes glittered with excitement as he watched his cards. And this man was Miriam Lemaire's husband! It seemed incredible.

"Well," she said, after he had left the table to go to the roulette, "don't you think I should be justified in anything I did?"

"You ought not to talk like that," I said.

"Lots of people commit suicide in Monte Carlo," she laughed.

"You are very foolish," I said reprovingly. "Besides, you forget the woman."

"If he were dead I could snap my fingers in her face, or, better, prosecute her for criminal libel."

"But she might find a murder a better card to play than bigamy," I suggested.

"How distressingly direct you always are, Mr. North, and what horrid words you use!"

"Let me beg of you to be careful," I urged.

"If you're going to moralize," she said, "I think we'd better part company. Look in the paper to-morrow morning. You'll probably read an interesting account of—well, no matter what."

And she turned and went away, leaving me cold with excitement. Also, I was left with the singularly disturbing feeling that I was going to be, if I were not already, an accessory to a murder—if not an accomplice in it.

I was very fond of Miriam Lemaire, but I felt that, if I remained silent now, I should have a man's blood on my hands. I must warn this brute Leboucher before it was too late.

I tried to find Miriam Lemaire again to tell her of my intention; but she was nowhere to be seen. I was beset by a feverish anxiety; I dared not wait and went swiftly back to the rooms. In the vestibule I met Miriam Lemaire leaning on the arm of the man I was to warn; the decrepit and horrible-looking gambler, Cesar Leboucher. They were leaving the Casino.

Miriam Lemaire saw me, and changed color. She was leading him away to kill him. I knew

it as well as if it had been written in letters of fire across the firmament. Be the risk what it might, I must prevent it. I pulled myself together and walked swiftly after them

XII

THE MYSTERY OF THE ROUND TABLE

MIRIAM LEMAIRE usually lived in hotels when she was abroad, and on many occasions she told me that she considered hotel life the ideal and the inevitable future method of living. I had therefore been a little surprised to find that she was not staying, as she usually did, at the Hôtel de Paris, but had taken a bijou villa at Les Moulins; a little blue-and-white box of bricks, with vermilion tiles, which rejoiced in the singularly inappropriate name of the Villa Elysée.

I had called upon her there, and had wondered why she had chosen to change her beautiful apartments at the Hôtel de Paris for a little villa, in hermit-like retirement. But, for aught I knew, Dorking had expressed a wish in the matter; anyhow, it was a fact accomplished, and the world knew that Miriam Lemaire had rented the Villa Elysée from the Contessa Branchino for the Riviera season.

I was, therefore, considerably surprised to find, when I followed Miriam Lemaire and the man Cesar Leboucher from the gaming rooms, that they did not go in the direction of the villa, but, on the contrary, turned to the left and walked slowly down the hill, in the direction of La Condamine. They were talking in an animated manner, and once or twice I heard Miriam Lemaire's crisp, clear laugh of genuine amusement break in upon the man's low growl of conversation. I was greatly puzzled.

My position was an awkward one. It was all very well to feel convinced that before me were a woman and a man, the one a murderess in intent, the other her unsuspecting victim, and to be filled with the very laudable resolve to prevent the carrying out of the heinous crime. But when, to all intents and purposes, the two parties in the prospective tragedy were walking together, chatting and laughing gaily, as if they were on the very best of possible terms, I could not very well overtake them, and drag the man away, crying, "Beware! This woman is going to murder you!" Neither could I join them without some legitimate excuse, knowing, as I did, the extraordinary relations existing between

them. What, then, was the alternative? Was there nothing for me to do but to mind my own business, knowing all the time that a man was being lured to his death?

What I did was probably what nine out of ten men similarly situated would have done—I followed them. What I should have done was to notify one of the many Monacan gendarmes of my suspicions, and so laid the responsibility of preventing the crime upon the persons whom society supports for that purpose. I did not, as I say; I followed them, and followed them at a respectful distance, realizing all the time that my behavior was most suspicious, and that everyone who met or overtook me must be remarking upon the fact.

As luck would have it—and luck has generally something to say in every momentous incident—a friend of mine came along just then, smote me on the back, and exclaimed:

“Hullo, North! How are you, old man? I’ve been following you and trying to make up my mind whether it’s drink, gambling, or love. I’ve never seen a man with such an unsteady walk in all my life. You’ve varied it a dozen times in the last forty fathoms.”

"How do you do, Admiral?" I exclaimed, gripping the hard and knotted hand of old Sir William Pawle. "I thought you were settling the peace of Europe in the Bosphorus!"

"Was, my dear North, but now no longer am. It's settled, and I'm on short leave. Came down here yesterday by the Limited Rapide—good train. Where are you staying? You're looking worried, though. What's the matter?"

"My dear Admiral," I stammered, "if you have a fraction of the tact you're universally credited with, you'll see that I don't want to have anything to do with you just at present. I'm staying up at the Riviera Palace. Look me up. *Au revoir!* Don't be offended."

Dear old Pawl blundered out some apologies and I left him, quickening my pace; but now I had lost the two people I had been following. They had disappeared. I forgot caution and appearances, and ran up and down in a most unseemly fashion, but to no purpose. I rushed down to the bottom of the hill, and I rushed back again. There were many promenaders about, but Miriam Lemaire and M. Cesar Leboucher were not among them. They must have turned off somewhere to the right, or gone

, into one of the hotels. But which turning and which hotel? That was the question.

I began to feel acutely uncomfortable. I should have warned the man while I had the chance. Now—who knew?—I might never get the chance. It was too late. I grew hot and cold, and wondered whether I should ever be able to forgive myself or sleep o' nights with a man's life on my soul. Incidentally, I heartily cursed the Admiral for his untimely interruption.

At the end of the ends there was nothing for it but to give up. I could not call at all the houses, cafés, and hotels, on the Boulevard de la Condamine, and there were half a dozen turnings to the right, any of which the pair might have taken. So I hailed a voiture, and drove up to my hotel to dress for dinner.

I was dining that night with the Moberly-Cheshunts on their yacht, which was lying in the harbor, and on my way down to La Condamine in my automobile we were blocked at the Crédit Lyonnais by four men, who were bearing from a large furniture emporium the top of the largest round table I have ever seen. It must have measured eleven or twelve feet in

diameter. It was a solidly made table, and was covered in good green baize, and I concluded that it was some contrivance for the Casino or some gaming club.

"What are you going to do with that?" I asked of the man who was superintending its transport.

He shrugged his shoulders.

"Who knows, m'sieu? It is enormous. It was made specially to madame's orders. It is a new game that madame has discovered, as if there were not enough chances to lose money in the old games."

"Then it is for a lady?"

"For Madame Lemaire of the Villa Elysée—the beautiful lady. M'sieu will surely know her."

So the large round table was for Miriam Lemaire. I smiled, and, when I could pass them, drove on down the hill. So she meant to go in for private play; perhaps that accounted for the change from the Hôtel de Paris to the Villa Elysée.

I am afraid I did not give my host and hostess a fair return for their very excellent entertainment on the yacht *Blue Daisy* that evening. I

was thinking of other things. Indeed, when I remember it, quite a number of people remarked on my absence of mind and general appearance of ill-health, while Sir William insisted that I was in for a return of the West Coast fever. But I knew better, and was glad when there was an excuse for my taking the electric launch ashore.

Denton, my diplomatic cousin, insisted on accompanying me. He was one of the *Blue Daisy's* party. He said he knew I was going to be ill; although he quite realized that my death would considerably increase his financial condition, he liked me too much to hurry on that event. I always liked Denton, but to-night he bored me.

"Come into the Casino?" he suggested.

"Thanks," I said; "I'm going to walk. Don't let me stop you losing your money."

"I'll walk with you," said Denton cheerfully.

"You're uncommonly good," I remarked, "but I'd rather you did n't."

"What a curious chap you are!" he laughed. "Old Pawle told me this afternoon that you cut up quite rusty because he spoke to you and you hadn't seen him for two years! Surely you have n't fallen in love?"

"Look here, Denton," I said sternly, for I always adopted a more or less paternal attitude with the youngster; "I'd be obliged if you'd allow me to bid you good-night now. I have not, as you very vulgarly put it, fallen in love, nor am I likely to. I'll leave that for you—for your sins."

"Where are you going?" he asked.

"I am not quite sure," I replied; "but I fancy I shall walk around to the Villa Elysée."

"Miriam Lemaire? By gad, I'll come too."

"You'll do nothing of the sort. Can't you see that I don't want you?"

"I'm coming anyway," said Denton quite firmly, and he linked his arm in mine.

I think I swore, but he only laughed cheerily.

"You're not fit to be left alone to-night, *mon cher cousin*," he said.

We walked on, and I think that I felt rather glad to have him with me. Certainly, in the light of subsequent events, I am exceedingly glad he did come. As I have remarked before, luck has generally had something to say in the varied orderings of my life.

As we walked on slowly, Denton referred casually to the Dorking-Lemaire engagement,

and also to the occasion when Miriam Lemaire had indirectly been the means of gaining him his appointment to Constantinople through the Delabole affair; and we found ourselves talking of that when we reached the villa.

There were no lights in any of the windows, and I was therefore not surprised when, in answer to our summons, the servant told us that Mrs. Lemaire was not at home. The man knew me, and consequently I believed that the statement was not the mere formality.

But on our way back through the prettily arranged, semi-tropical grounds I happened to hear a voice coming from the house—a man's voice—and I stopped, for there was something in the tone that was reminiscent. Then I heard a crisp laugh—a clear, merry laugh, that could come from no other than Miriam Lemaire herself.

The servant had lied, then. She was at home; and, what was more, she was with Cesar Le-boucher.

My throat grew suddenly very dry, and my heart beat with quite unaccustomed quickness. I looked back. A light was shining through the spreading blades of a palm at the side of the

house. The French windows seemed to be open, for the voices came from there. I looked at Denton, and wished he were on board the *Blue Daisy*.

"What's the matter?" he asked.

I hesitated a moment; then I said:

"Denton, I must trust you."

"Well?"

"I'm in—there is something going wrong here."

"Ah, I knew there was something wrong," he said coolly. "What is it?"

"Will you help me?"

"It depends."

"To prevent—to prevent—" I still hesitated. It was a serious charge to make.

"Well, to prevent what?" said Denton snappily. "Heaven above us, man, you are most provokingly mysterious!"

"To prevent a man being murdered!" I said, in a tense whisper.

"Good God!" ejaculated Denton.

"Hush! Not a sound, if you can help it. They are both in there." I pointed in the direction of the light. "Here—let us get off the path. We can creep around those bushes. Don't make a noise!"

"Are you mad?" gasped Denton, seizing my arm. "What is all this about?"

"Come with me and you'll see. And— Yes, Denton, if you see nothing, if it is a false alarm, if nothing happens, forget all about it."

"Is it anything to do with the Lemaire woman?"

"Yes—and with someone else."

"Whom?"

"You shall see. Come; we must be careful."

"Are you going to play the spy?" he whispered.

"Until I know that I am not mistaken."

"And then?"

"Hush!"

We both listened, standing still. The voices had ceased. It was quite silent, but every now and then a curious creaking noise, like a door opening on unoiled hinges, broke the stillness.

"What is it?" I breathed.

"A frog or a bird, I should say," replied Denton.

The sound was repeated with rhythmic regularity. For the rest, all was silence.

Yet I had not the slightest doubt in my mind

that I had heard Leboucher's voice a minute ago—his voice and her laugh.

"I want to see who is in that room," I said to Denton, who still persisted in trying to drag me away. I am sure he was fully convinced that I had suddenly taken leave of my senses.

"Well, if you must," he said reluctantly. "Let us go and see who is in the room."

"Don't be a fool!" I said irritably. "I'm not mad!"

"Of course not—of course not! What an idea!" And Denton laughed. "Mad! Why, my dear man, you're as sane as I am; though I'm hanged," I heard him remark beneath his breath, "if I know whether I am or not!"

Cautiously, like two burglars, we drew near to the French windows, and at length, emerging from behind a giant cactus, we crouched—or at least I did, for Denton kept discreetly in the background—and looked into the room.

What I saw was the most extraordinarily curious thing.

The room was large and furnished in the style of the Louis Quinze epoch; its color scheme was pale blue and white. In the centre of the floor was the huge, circular, green-baize-

covered table I had seen early in the evening—a curiously incongruous object in such a dainty room. But this was not what I saw first of all—only what I noticed afterwards; for on the green table, lying on his back, either asleep or dead, was the man Cesar Leboucher. His feet dangled over the edge, his head was almost exactly in the centre of the table. He was in evening dress, and his face looked even more repulsive than ever. But the most extraordinary thing about it was that the great table was quickly revolving all the while, so that his feet spun around at a great rate, though his head remained in exactly the same position.

I stared at this curious sight with bated breath. The regular motion of the revolving table fascinated me—held me, as it were, in a kind of mesmeric stupor; and how long I might have remained thus I do not know, had not Denton suddenly seized my wrist from behind in a grip of iron.

“What does it mean?” he asked in a deep whisper. “How the dickens is the table worked? What an extraordinary thing! But who on earth is the fellow lying on the table? By Jove! I should think it would make him giddy!”

I moved silently a little to the left to get a wider view of the room. The great table certainly could not be moving of its own accord; and as I edged farther to the left I discovered its motive power. Miriam Lemaire was crouching on the floor. She was turning the table with her hands with apparent ease. It seemed well balanced, and revolved without difficulty.

What could it mean? Again I looked back at Denton; he had not seen what I had seen.

"Denton," I whispered, "if you don't want to be let in for an unpleasant business, go—go away at once! I will tell you everything afterwards."

"And you?" he asked. "Are you coming?"

"No," I said; "I am going in there."

"I think I'll wait," said Denton obstinately.

"Think of your position!" I urged. "You don't want to be dragged into scandal. Be sensible, I beg you."

He gave vent to a sharp little laugh.

"You speak," he said, "as if—" Then he stopped, for from the room came a short exclamation of alarm, and immediately afterwards the electric light was extinguished.

"Idiot!" I ejaculated. "She heard you."

"She? Who?"

I did not wait to explain. I rose from my cramped position and rushed unceremoniously through the open French windows into the room.

I heard a woman cry out, and the click of a revolver. I clutched the table; it was still rotating slowly.

"Who is it?" asked Miriam Lemaire in an intensely quiet voice. "And, whoever you are, you are covered with a revolver. I shall not hesitate to shoot."

"Don't!" I cried. "It is I—North. Turn up the light."

"Mr. North!" she cried in a voice that betrayed her intense relief; but she did not turn on the light. "What are you doing here? Are you alone? I thought I heard another voice."

"My cousin Denton is outside," I answered, trying to speak quite calmly, as if our visit and the method of the visit were the most commonplace thing in the world.

She came towards me. I could faintly distinguish her figure in the gloom.

"Send him away," she whispered, in great agitation. "For the love of Heaven, send him away."

"I have tried to; but he won't go," I said.

"Has he—have you seen anything?" she breathed.

"Yes," I said.

"Both of you?"

"Yes."

"You spies! Cowards!"

"Hush!" I remonstrated. "Denton can be trusted. Turn up the light. What were you doing?"

She laughed a little wildly, and flooded the room with light. Denton was peering in at the window, white-faced and bewildered. He went at once to the man on the table, and touched him; Miriam Lemaire, still clutching the revolver, stood swaying unevenly by the door.

"Good God!" gasped Denton, looking around wildly. "The man is dead!"

Miriam Lemaire darted forward with a cry of triumph.

"Then you were too late!" she laughed.

"You meant to kill him?" cried Denton; but a look from me reduced him to silence.

Together we lifted Cesar Leboucher to a sofa. Denton was right. He was quite dead.

Miriam Lemaire faced us.

"

"You have played the part of spies upon me!" she cried fiercely. "Now what are you going to do? Speak, or remain silent?"

"It will make little difference," I said. "He is dead. How will you account for that?"

"That is my business. Since you have voluntarily made yourselves my accomplices, you may as well know that I have sent a worthless and altogether disreputable person out of this world by a means as old as civilization. It was called euthanasia by the ancients. It is easy, by the means you saw, to regulate the centrifugal force—the cerebral circulation. If I place you on the table, I can either increase or decrease the supply of blood to your head, dependent on whether I put your head or your feet in the centre. A moderate rotation causes either abstraction of blood from the head or congestion—first a faintness, then insensibility, which soon becomes permanent. In the case of monsieur"—she glanced carelessly at the dead man—"it has become permanent. No one—doctor, scientist, or other—can possibly tell how monsieur passed away. Will you oblige me, dear Mr. North, by carrying it out into the garden and leaving it there?"

"But how," I exclaimed, "did you get him up on the table?"

"He was drunk, and I—well, I am stronger than I look. He barely weighs nine stone."

Denton and I looked at her and obeyed her blindly.

"I would give a lot not to have been let in for this!" groaned Denton.

"I warned you!" I retorted.

"But, man alive, did you suspect?"

"I have been spending the last few hours in trying to prevent it. I have failed."

"But what can be done?" asked Denton.

"There is nothing to be done but to forget," I said.

Denton may have taken my advice, or he may not. He has never referred to the incident since.

The body was discovered early the next morning; and, it being in Monte Carlo, the death was hushed up. The deceased was known, and as he had a lot of money in his pockets, they returned a verdict of "death from apoplexy."

"It was the only way," Miriam Lemaire said to me afterwards. "It has bought silence and

has spoilt the kitchen cat's game. Monte Carlo asks few questions; it can't afford to."

I stared at her in horror.

"Have you no feeling, no heart, no conscience?" I asked. "I wonder if you believe in another life?"

"I may believe in another life," she laughed, "but I am living in this, and that is quite sufficient for me for the time. By the way, I want you to bring your cousin, Mr. Denton, in to-night and play a new game I've invented. We are calling it 'The Round Table.'"

She had paid the price, and yet she never became Dorking's wife. Two weeks after the death of the gambler, Cesar Leboucher, news came from England that Dorking was ill; two days after that, the wires flashed the announcement that he was dead. I was not in Monaco at the time; I was trying to run away from a guilty conscience.

XIII

HOW THE PRINCE PAID HIS DEBT

AFTER the murder in the Villa Elysée, I became a wanderer on the face of the earth. Excuse myself as I would, I could not disguise the fact that I was in some measure responsible for the death of the man Cesar Leboucher. Moreover, such poor shreds of conscience as my long association with Miriam Lemaire had left me assured me that my plain duty was to give Cesar Leboucher's slayer up to justice; and since I was not good enough, or bad enough, to do this, I took a weak man's refuge in flight, hoping that I should never see Miriam Lemaire again.

It was on board of one of the Nord-Deutscher Lloyd Eastern liners, when I was homeward bound from Japan, that I met them both—Prince Henry of Saxe-Magdeburg and Miriam Lemaire. Prince Henry had been touring in India, incognito, and was returning to Europe; and Miriam Lemaire had joined the ship at

Colombo, at the same time as the Prince, and in company with him, as it seemed.

From Colombo to Aden I saw little of them, but whenever I did see them they were together. We were pretty badly crowded on the *König Otto*, and the Red Sea passage reminded one of Dante's Inferno with the Hebrew Gehenna added. But we lost some of our people at Port Said, a few more at Alexandria, and so many more at Naples and Genoa that the saloon was practically deserted for the run around Gibraltar and home.

Prince Henry was of those who left the ship at Naples. He was going overland to Standstadt, his father's capital. But Miriam Lemaire remained, and now I began to see more of her. One day, when we were sitting out the afternoon in our deck chairs—it was while we were crossing the Bay of Biscay, and the weather was as perfect as the heart of man could desire—she startled me by saying suddenly:

“We shall hear news when we reach Southampton—important news.”

“What makes you think so?” I inquired.

“I don't think—I know. Don't ask me how I know; I can't tell you. But my presentiments never fail.”

"What a strange woman you are!" I said, sitting up. "Sometimes I catch myself wondering if you are all human."

She laughed rather oddly.

"Oh, yes; I am human. Perhaps that is my misfortune—that I am all human. The divine afflatus that other people seem to have in greater or less degree was left out of my composition." She paused and then went on, half hesitantly: "Mr. North, may I tell you a story—something that concerns me very deeply?"

"You have not to ask," I said soberly. "You have only to command, where I am concerned."

She waved my confession of weakness aside as a thing to be taken for granted.

"Do you know Prince Henry of Saxe-Magdeburg?" she asked.

"A plain untitled English gentleman is not likely to be chummy with royalty," I said, rather bitterly, I am afraid. "But I know of him. What about him?"

"I'll tell you, if you care to listen. I met him six weeks ago in Calcutta. Ah, Mr. North, I have lived very many years in these last six weeks. Don't stop me," she pleaded. "You have been in some sort my father confessor—

the only one I have ever had. I want to make this one more confession before I——”

I bowed, and she went on.

“As I was saying, I met Prince Henry in Calcutta, at a Vice-regal function. From the moment I saw him, spoke to him, danced with him, he became to me what no other man has ever been before—never! Oh, I am very human, after all, Mr. North.”

“You—you fell——” I could not say the word, but she said it.

“Yes; I love him—love him madly, unreasoningly. I adore him. I could worship him as a god!”

“God pity you!” I said; and I meant it from my heart. I had said that I did not know Prince Henry of Saxe-Magdeburg personally; and, truly, no honest gentleman would want to know him. A member of one of the reigning houses of Europe, and the heir presumptive to a throne: when this was said, all was said. Misformed, heavy-faced, doltish, with all the grosser vices of the immoral German, he was a man to make a pure woman shudder with disgust.

It was only by a very great effort of self control that I forced myself to say in an ordinary

tone: "You certainly surprise me. Of course, you know he cannot marry you?"

She smiled. "He wanted to marry me in Calcutta, but even then I loved him too much to let him. If he should marry without the approval of the King and his ministers, he would lose the right to the succession."

"He will not do that," I said, basing the remark upon the world's verdict on the Prince.

"He will," she said, quite positively. "He has gone home now to ask his father's permission. The succession would pass to his younger brother. Tell me," she went on feverishly, "will the King permit it? Will the country allow it? He is so good—so noble. Ah, me! they will never let him go!"

If I smiled, I was careful not to let her see. Prince Henry's younger brother had all the virtues that the heir presumptive lacked: he was the idol of his father, the King, and of the people of Saxe-Magdeburg.

"Prince Henry will—" I began, and then I thought better of it. "The obstacles will doubtless be removed."

"But you think I ought not to let—to let him make such a sacrifice for me?" she faltered.

"That I ought rather to sacrifice myself—my love?"

"Assuredly," I said calmly.

"I can't!" she burst out. "I love him too much. I must keep him!"

There followed a long and painfully embarrassed pause, and I asked myself more than once if I ought not to tell the ship's doctor that the most clever and brilliant woman of the age had suddenly and mysteriously lost her reason. But, of course, I did not.

For the short remainder of the voyage, though we met as usual, there was no further reference to Prince Henry, and in all respects Miriam Lemaire was as she had formerly been—charming, interesting, fascinating. When at length we ran into the Solent and stood together looking at the Needles, I began to wonder if the strange conversation in the Bay of Biscay were not the figment of a dream.

As I was going direct to Paris, and she to London, we parted in the customs shed. It was while we were saying good-bye that a newsboy sold me a copy of the *Times*. Almost the first thing I saw was a headline, reading:

**"SUDDEN DEATH OF THE KING OF SAXE-
MAGDEBERG."**

Miriam Lemaire saw the headline, too, and she cried out in despair.

"My presentiment!" she gasped; and at the moment she looked as if twenty added years had rolled over her in as many seconds.

A moment later we shook hands silently in farewell. I knew what she was thinking: that Prince Henry was now King Henry, and her love-castle in Spain had crumbled to dust.

"Good-bye, Mr. North," she said absently.

"*Au revoir*," I replied. "May I hope to see you in town next week?"

"No," she said sadly. "I do not think we shall ever meet again."

I remember the look on her face as she said it. But she was wrong: we were to meet again, though never as we had been meeting. The leave-taking under the customs shed at Southampton was really our final farewell.

A week afterwards I was in London, and I made it a point to call early at the house in Park Street. The servant told me that Mrs. Lemaire was not in London; that she had gone abroad again.

"Where?" I made bold to ask.

"To Standstadt," was the calm reply.

I did not go at once to Saxe-Magdeburg, as my inclination prompted, though I knew I should go, sooner or later. It was much later, as it chanced. The death of a relative took me again to Japan, and it was a full year before I saw London again. Naturally, I again sought the house in Park Street. This time it was empty, and bore the sign "To Let." That decided me. The next Ostend steamer had me as a passenger, and two days later I was registered at the Kaiserhof in the Saxe-Magdeburg capital.

My first visit was to Charters, our Minister.

"Why, Mr. North, of all places in the world, I should think Standstadt would be the last that would call you!" he said good-naturedly. "What art treasure have you discovered here?"

I answered him in kind, and afterwards led him to talk of the political situation in the petty kingdom. He diverted easily, and, among other things, told me that the new King had overcome the popular prejudices and was having fair weather of it.

"You may meet his Majesty to-night, if you

care to go with me to the reception given by the Countess Lemaire," said Sir Richard, hospitably.

"The—Countess—Lemaire?" I echoed. "Is she——"

Charters laughed. "She is the lady whom everybody kowtows to, and nobody questions too closely. She is the King's friend. Hers was the first title he created after his coronation. Also, and quite apart from her character, she is the most beautiful woman the Lord ever let live."

"Sir Richard," said I, "did you ever meet a Mrs. Miriam Lemaire, in the London days?"

"No; but I have heard of her. Why?"

"Because I thought—well, I don't know just what it was that I did think. But I shall certainly accept your invitation for to-night. It is not every day that I get a chance to meet royalty—even microscopic royalty."

I found that the new Countess lived in a palace near the New Park, and from the outer vestibule to the inner there were evidences that luxury and good taste and money had done all that was possible. One glance at the superb figure standing at the head of the grand stair-

way, calmly receiving her guests, was enough. Charters's Countess was my Miriam.

She met me without a tremor of an eyelash, and when Sir Richard introduced me and I bent low over her hand, she said, in German, "It gives me great pleasure to meet you, Herr North. You are very welcome."

Shortly afterwards the King arrived, and in due course I was presented to his Majesty, which was the only part of him I cared to meet. "Pig!" was my mental comment; though that was an insult to the animal. The bestial face, the twisting shoulders, the bandy legs, the heavy, repulsive frown, were the same; and the trappings of royalty seemed only to emphasize them.

After his Majesty had gone, and I was chatting with one of Sir Richard's attachés, the Countess found me out.

"May I ask you to take me to the palm room, Mr. North?" she said, in English this time. "These rooms are inexpressibly warm."

When we had found a quiet corner she dropped her reserve like a cast-off garment and attacked me.

"Why did you come here?" she demanded. I told her why.

She glanced up with the look that I had seen in her eyes once or twice before.

"Tell me," she said: "is it love?"

I shook my head.

"I am afraid it is something less than love," I confessed. "You draw me as the magnet draws the steel; but the circuit is broken as soon as I am with you."

"Bah!" she said, with an impatient wave of her jewel-incrusted fan. "Then it is mere vulgar curiosity?"

"You may call it that, if you please; but I think it is something better than that."

"I don't want you here," she said bluntly. "I wish to forget the old life, and you bring it all back to me. Did n't I tell you that I was human?"

"Is the new life so much better?" I asked cynically.

"It is the only life that is left for me, now," she answered sombrely. "I must be near him. You don't believe that; but I must."

"That you may hug your degradation?"

"That I may—but you can't understand."

"Does he pay for all this?" I asked, with a comprehensive glance for the luxuries.

"No," she said dully. "I am living on my for—on my winnings. It is all mine."

"And I suppose you lend him money?"

"No; I give it to him. All that I have is his."

"He repays you?"

"Amplly; oh, yes; amplly. He has made me a Countess, and he lets me live in Standstadt, near him."

"But he cannot marry you?"

"He could have married me before—but I would not let him. I love him too well."

"There is a new Queen, now, I hear," I added, sparing her nothing.

"She is nothing; merely a political figure. I am his queen, and I shall always be. While he lives I shall always be with him."

I rose. Her manner had become that of one hopeless, dead, and her voice was the voice of those who call from beyond the abysses. And she was still so superbly beautiful! I thought of the deformed, semi-imbecile, wholly brutal King, and I looked upon this wonderful woman and shivered.

This, then, was her punishment: the horrible retribution which had overtaken her. She had made puppets and playthings of good men all

her life—scores of them; and now she had become the willing puppet and slave of a doltish brute who chanced to wear a crown. As a penalty for her crimes, her evil nature, her rapacity, her flint-like callousness, her more than inhuman cruelty, her contempt for the laws of God and man, she was condemned to bury her magnificent personality, her transcendent beauty, her almost superhuman charms, in gilded obscurity at a King's left hand.

I left the palace sadly, not with Sir Richard, for I wanted to be alone. There was nothing to keep me in Standstadt. The Miriam Lemaire I had known was dead.

THE END.

**Gift of The People of the United States
Through the Victory Book Campaign
(A. L. A. — A. R. C. — U. S. O.)
To the Armed Forces and Merchant Marine**



